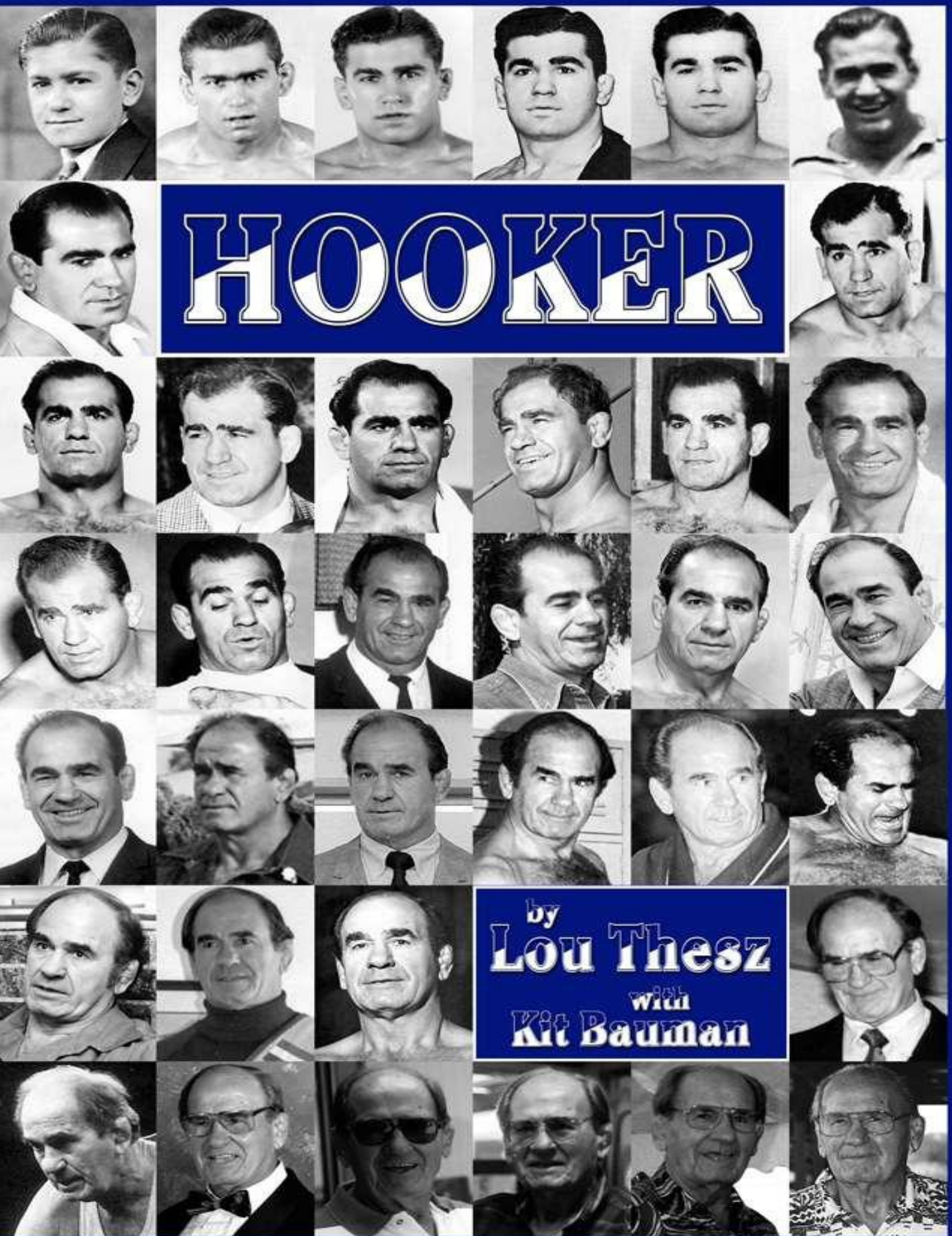
HOOKER
by
Lou Thesz
with
Kit Bauman

HOOKER

by Lou Thesz, with Kit Bauman

Edited by J Michael Kenyon

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword by Charlie Thesz
Foreword by Kit Bauman
Chapter 1

Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Endnotes, Chapter 1
Endnotes, Chapter 2
Endnotes, Chapter 3
Endnotes, Chapter 4
Endnotes, Chapter 5
Endnotes, Chapter 6

Endnotes, Chapter 7
Endnotes, Chapter 8
Endnotes, Chapter 9
Endnotes, Chapter 10
Endnotes, Chapter 11
Endnotes, Chapter 12
Endnotes, Chapter 13
Endnotes, Chapter 14
Endnotes, Chapter 15
Endnotes, Chapter 16
Endnotes, Chapter 17
Endnotes, Chapter 18
Addendum

Foreword by Charlie Thesz

The process ...

Let me begin with a disclaimer. This is not historical. The dates which are offered have been altered to fit my memory, but the characters are real. The process was observed first hand, up

close, and very personally.

I was certainly not the first person to urge Lou into writing a book, but I was the first one to sit at a computer with only floppy discs and type the wonderful stories about his childhood and entry into the world of professional wrestling.

Whenever we were home, we would forego television and work on Lou's book. It was pretty amazing to see a man I had known — in every sense of the word — in a new and different light.

However, when we stayed up all night talking about things, our sessions took me back to the road trips we had made, during which time we spent hours talking and reminiscing about his life. It took almost 30 years before I became bored, and even then, I wasn't bored all of the time. Well, okay. It was a good bit of the time. Now I only wish I could remember the stories Lou told me again and again.

At first, writing a book was not on my agenda. It was simply a new way of communication for the two of us. For me, the joy was in "meeting" Lou as a child. He was 57 years old when we met, and since there was a 30-year difference in our ages, he always appeared bigger than life to me. It wasn't that people on the street recognized him; the reverence in which the younger wrestlers held him; the reverence in which most of his peers held him; the economic value of his services; or his loyalty to his principles and his profession. It was the warmth and courtesy he showed to everyone he encountered. He had such confidence in who he was, and in many ways, he extended that confidence to others. (He certainly did than for this unsophisticated divorcee from Alabama.)

As we talked, I began to get some insight into the development of Lou as a person. To hear Lou's story from the beginning, during a time unrelated to professional wrestling, was so very heartwarming.

I was not too surprised when he told me he was

shy as a child. He was still shy. It was part of his charm. I knew his mother and his three sisters, and his stories of Pop had been so colorful, I felt as if I knew Pop, too. Lou didn't speak one word of English when he began first grade. He was bright and learned quickly, although not to his perspective. By second grade, Lou had mastered the language, but hated school. To add to his frustration, he was discovered trying to write with his left hand, which was totally unacceptable. He was forced to write with his right hand by literally having his left hand tied behind his back. He was so traumatized by school that, as a seven-year-old, he still wet the bed at night. As if that wasn't humiliating enough, the efforts to correct his use of his left hand manifested itself in Lou developing a lisp.

I sat at Lou's huge desk with my back to him as he lay across the guest room bed and told his story. When we began the writing, I had known this man intimately for 15 years, and for most of those years, we had spent almost every hour

together. I was reassured on a daily basis by his physical and emotional strength, not to mention his self confidence. As I began to imagine this awkward, disoriented, frustrated child, I had to turn around and see that MY Lou Thesz really existed. There was no sadness in his eyes, no regret, and no resentment. The memories were just the way it was. He was smiling at me, and he laughed as he said, "It wasn't bad enough that I hated school and was made to attend German school on Saturdays. NOW I had to go to lisping school!"

I always felt the measure of a person was what they could take from a lesson. Lou became ambidextrous and parlayed that into enhancing his wrestling skills. He had a voice so deep and rich he could have made a fortune as a commentator. He did do color commentary for wrestling and was one hell of a "sweet talker." He had taken the max from his lessons.

The traumatic years had made their mark, though,

and Lou, in adolescence, was still uncertain about his worth. His best friend, Will Meyer, was so very important to him. Lou worked in his father's shoe-repair shop and had his chores, so his "play time" was not to be wasted. Will had even saved his life when they were swimming the river and Lou lacked the strength to get to shore. Will was bigger and stronger, so it did not really acutely endanger Will's life while saving Lou's. Lou said, "I could only think about the mother of a little boy how had drowned as she sobbed and wailed." When Lou told me of a later incident when he questioned the honesty of Will's boast about shooting a bird "on the fly," and felt so betrayed when Will hit him, I could see sadness in his eyes. He said it made him physically ill. I wasn't very sympathetic. Lou had missed a very important lesson, and I reveled in explaining it to him. I asked Lou if Will could have felt betrayed when his best friend, whose life he had saved, called him a liar. After he gave it some thought, the shock of my question turned into the deep, rich laugher which came easily when it was

sincere. He said, "I can see that." He and Will had remained friends for many years. It was 'a guy thing.'

I loved spending time with young Lou. To keep Lou encouraged about the book, I presented the picture of a wonderful legacy for his sons, who at that time were still struggling to find who they were. I stand by that focus, too. It would be wonderful for us all to have an opportunity to know our parents when they were young. We all hear stories, but to have someone organize and fill in the gaps on the life of a parent would be thrilling to those of us blessed with parents we loved and admired. It never occurred to Lou that anyone else would be interested in his life.

Lou, in his youth, was more like George Tragos. He took life seriously and his focus was intense. I could only imagine the fun of watching a prostitute approach Lou. He was a devout (terrified) Catholic and feared George even more. Sex was forbidden by both God and

George! Ray Steele could not resist yanking Lou's chain, so the girls would come on to Lou and embarrass him, as well as terrify him. Lou was convinced any "contact" with such women would risk his manhood forever. Don't be sad here. He made up for a late start.

It was a rare experience to watch someone I knew so well in his later years, Lou being almost 60 years old when we married, relive the earlier years in his life. Although Lou was very introspective with the book, I could see the changes in his mood with his reevaluation of his life and associates. For all the disappointments he encountered in the "wrestling game," as he called it, he had far more people he admired, respected, and loved.

Not to lessen his father's influence in Lou's life, but when we first met, he talked more about Ed (Strangler) Lewis than his father. He loved Pop and came to appreciate (as we all do) his father's contribution to his success, but Ed represented the

one person Lou wanted to grow up to be. I loved the expression I saw on his face whenever he talked about Ed. Although they disagreed on the promoter Lou loathed the most, Toots Mondt, I never heard Lou say one negative thing about Ed.

A more disciplined affection would come with talk of George Tragos. While Ed had shaped Lou's career in professional wrestling, George turned a gangly, naïve Hungarian-German-Catholic kid into a world-class wrestler. Lou gave George all the credit to that end. With George and Ray Steele, and even Ed, Lou only saw their generosity. He never saw what they gained from the relationship. I always felt these men regained their youth and passion for wrestling through a talented, passionate kid who gave up all other aspects of his life for the opportunity to learn from them. Lou saw them as giants, but I am sure Lou's talent, devotion, and admiration made them feel like giants, as well. Lou was very elementary. He never saw his contribution to their lives. In Ed's later years, Lou was his champion and returned the

support and sponsorship. In Lou's mind, George Tragos would never let Lou help him in any way, but I think Lou gave George a tremendous return on his investment. He made George proud and carried forth a skill few could have mastered. George was unmatched in hooking, and Lou was his legacy.

I had all the stories of the years Lou spent learning the sport of wrestling, developing his natural skills, and seeing the world for what it really was. All this said, Lou never really grasped the reality of every other industry or profession having its Lou Daros, Toots Mondts, and Dick Leans. Never, ever, did he even consider other industries or professions having counterparts equal to George Tragos, Ad Santel, Ed Lewis, and Ray Steele. I was looking at a man in his seventies who still worshipped the heroes of his youth. There were no feet of clay where those giants were concerned. There was just enough of that young Lou Thesz to make him confident that no one else had ever had such tremendous gifts from

such gods. I can still see his face as he talked of the feats and the "ribs" (jokes) they played. George Tragos was not one to play jokes, but he was the one to show Lou a world so magical and powerful it shaped him into a wrestler.

In the background of the early process was the man who knew Lou best — Koji Miyamoto. Koji was not much more than a "boy" when he first met Lou, and their relationship began when Koji was in his late teens. He would "be there" whenever Lou was in Japan. He would be at the airport, the hotel, the matches. He spoke English and was so very respectful. All the Japanese were respectful, but Koji was more. Koji had a presence and a purpose Lou admired. Lou had first wrestled in Japan the year Koji was born. To be in their presence made you believe the universe had paired them.

Koji was more than an historian and magazine writer. He truly knew Lou and understood his place in the overall scheme of the game. I'm not

sure Lou always saw himself as a major player in professional wrestling. Lou recognized when he had the upper hand and knew how far he could push, but he never saw himself as a "champion," as in fighting for the overall good. Koji understood Lou's role, and as their friendship developed, Koji was a major player in Lou's life. More than the business manager, more than the historian, Koji and Lou were true friends.

When I first met Koji, he was 25 years old. Koji visited us in our home and instantly became one of my closest friends. Koji knew everything about Lou's life, as if it was all on film in his head, and he need only play it as a reminder. While this seemed supernatural, there was never any question it was a gift — to both Lou and Koji. If Lou needed any detail while writing the book, Koji knew it — matches, personal appearances, Lou's personal life. Koji was always there for Lou as a friend and business manager.

As always, Koji still gives to Lou his

knowledge, photo collection, and friendship in this edition of Hooker.

I did all the fun stuff, and when it became hard, I lost interest, but Lou had been encouraged by the book idea. So many people were writing books, getting his input, and encouraging him to do the same. When Lou gave serious thought to a book, he contacted Dave Meltzer. Lou was fond of Dave, and at that time, Dave was very controversial, and probably still is, with the dyed-in-the-wool wrestlers of Lou's era, because Dave exposed the business. Lou had realized many years ago, the fans did not come for the sport of wrestling. They came for the morality play. The attraction for the fans was "good versus evil," "right versus wrong," being mistreated and fighting back against all odds. It was all about someone to cheer on and someone to hate. They came to see their lives played out in a wrestling ring.

Dave said he was flattered, but he knew someone much more capable for this goal: Kit Bauman.

Kit and Lou became instant friends. Kit admired Lou, but he had no stars in his eyes. Well, no more than the very minimum glazing over of the eyes with all who met Lou Thesz (and many who just met Lou). Lou had earned an unmatched place in professional wrestling history and Kit was a wrestling historian. Kit visited, he and Lou talked, and the book was agreed upon. The agreeing part was smooth and exciting.

When Kit took over the book, I was thrilled. I had loved my venture into Lou's childhood, and he had enjoyed the telling, but it was time to bring in a professional. I was great for the "history for the kids," but all beyond that would be "work."

The work part was a horse of a different color. Lou was not programmed for this, and Kit was not a work horse, either. I can be critical of Kit and be fair. As a child, my nickname (until college) was "Kit." We share more than a nickname. We have the same lack of focus unless we are under pressure bordering on house

arrest. Let me say here, I adore and respect Kit Bauman ... procrastination and all.

The "plan" was for Lou to record all his thoughts and stories on small audio cassettes. Kit would transcribe them into the computer, organize them chronologically, and write the book.

I have often assumed Lou felt this was out of balance, so he would write the story or observations in long hand on yellow legal pads and read the story or observation into the tape recorder. Making it more difficult for himself must have somehow balanced the work load in his mind. I hope the recorder did not detect my laughter in the background. It was better than a sitcom for me. No, it was a sitcom for me.

In fairness to Lou, he was an exacting person. As he aged, he took more time with projects. He was more interested in the quality outcome than the expedience. He was frustrated by his lack of speed, but not compromised by it. He

wanted the wording well phased and expressive of his view or recollection. Telling the story to a sleepy spouse or fascinated fan was one thing, but publishing his thoughts was much more serious. Lou was a serious person when it came to business, and this was his new career.

Lou liked Kit from the get-go. He enjoyed his company and respected his ability to write. He knew Kit had worked for a prominent daily newspaper in Dallas, but it all came into focus when Kit sent some old tapes for Lou to record over. On one of the tapes was Kit interviewing Anwar Sadat. Sadat had been assassinated by this time, and maybe that made it more awesome. Lou Thesz was definitely awed. He looked at me and stated, "I cannot record over this." (A side story here: The first time Lou and I were ever in Tulsa, Oklahoma together, Reagan was shot the day we arrived. The second time we arrived in Tulsa, Anwar Sadat was shot and killed. So, we felt some cosmic connection. We did risk a third trip, which went off without international incident.)

Hooker cannot be compared to the creation of a child. This was much more difficult: too much, much longer, and at least equally miraculous. Neither Lou nor Kit was the ramrod, and I knew better than to nag. My nagging was metered for a higher-gain ratio. I knew this was creative and I had little or no part in it. No gestation period in nature could rival how long this process took. We are talking years! And years. It was rare to have both men gung ho at the same time.

In all fairness, life continued to go on around Kit and Lou. Making a living took priority for both. Hooker was a hobby, and the passion for this hobby would boil and freeze. They rarely registered the same temperature. As with the forum Lou had hosted on AOL Grandstand much earlier, Lou could not really convince himself that anyone would be interested in his life story. The questions asked never ceased to amaze him. His response would be, "Why would anyone care about that?" Lou never mastered the computer, so I

was his computer slave and was literally in the middle of every Q&A on the forum. I did try to teach him the computer, but I now admit, I liked being in the middle.

Back to Hooker: The development of the book was slow. At turns in the road, it would come to a dead stop. Kit's life or our life would take drastic detours and interest would be diverted. All the detours in our life and Kit's would be another book in itself. Suffice it to say, the ball hit the floor more than it was in the air.

When he was engaged in the book, Lou became a different person. Kit would give him an assignment: an era, a territory, a promoter, a major influence in his life. Lou would become obsessed. His memory would not produce a required name, town, or finish to a match, and his perfectionist side would become perplexed. No one achieves the stature in their chosen field without the determination to get it right. Wrestling was even more intense since your physical well

being, and even life itself, could be at risk. For Lou, it was just the only way. Any threat of defeat served to spur him. For me, the fun was seeing Lou track down old friends, allies, and not-such-friends to ask questions. He was not one to call an old friend. I would tease him about phone calls not being as expensive as the "olden days."

I did notice how Lou would try to analyze his assessment of his peers. Lou was objective about professional wrestling as a business, but he had his standards. I know many people never considered "standards" in professional wrestling, but Lou resented promoters who only wanted the money; who would "kill a territory" with garbage matches and move on; and who used and abused the wrestlers. It never ceased to amaze me how much leeway he would give those guys before he would write them off as detrimental to mankind. Jack Pfefer was maligned and despise by so many in professional wrestling, but Lou saw him as a champion who, more or less, stuck his finger in the eye of the "dirty son-of-a-bitch" promoters in New

York. He loved Jack's warped sense of humor and out-and-out audacity! Unlike the SOBs, Jack had respect, and not contempt, for the wrestlers.

Lou's family also got involved in the book because Lou needed facts and dates. His sisters rose to the occasion and Lou even connected with people from his childhood in Banat, Michigan (his birthplace). Pictures were gathered, tales were told, and laughter was usually the final product. Lou's three sisters are very proud of him, but he was their only brother, and they would have been equally proud of him if he had taken over Pop's shoe-repair business. Part of it was the "male child" European traditions had instilled in them. Part of it was because they all loved him as their brother.

Once again, back to the Kit/Lou process. The yellow sheets, research, and tape recordings were intense, if intermittent. When Kit was hot, he would request info to fill in the blank spots of the continuum. To make matters more amusing (yes, I

am a bit twisted), Lou would go off on tangents and not focus on what Kit needed, sending Kit in a different direction. It was almost as if they were playing long-distance chess ... but not the same game.

Lou had his hip replacement at age 71, but that didn't slow his activity. Three years later, on December 26, 1990, he wrestled Masahiro Chono in Hamamatsu, Japan. Okay, okay. He lost the match, but he took the "loss" in stride. He always said, "I was old enough to know better, but I did it anyway." To tell the truth, he was devastated. Another one of those lessons learned. All of this "reality" had given Lou more focus on the book.

When the rough draft of the first few chapters came to Lou, he was pleased. No one could fault Kit's writing, and it was definitely in Lou's voice, so much so his baby sister gives Kit little credit for the book. I was involved in my career, so I had not "overseen" any of the writing. I had given Kit

what I had written from Lou's childhood and early wrestling years as reference, but paid little attention from there. Some of the book was a shock to me! I was surprised at how shocked. I saw a side of Lou I had not seen before.

I know age had some part in it, as well as Lou's growing disappointment with the lack of "wrestling" in professional wrestling. I had never seen that anger in him, but now it was on the pages. Kit did not know these people, so it was all Lou. I know it was all Lou because he was very comfortable with the printed page.

The most glaring was his almost vicious assessment of Rocca. I understood I had not been in his life at that time and there was a lot I did not know. Maybe I was jealous of the recesses of the man I loved he had hidden from me. Maybe I just didn't understand. But there was no "maybe" about me sticking my nose in there. True, I had met and spent some time with Rocca on the first trip I ever made to Japan. Lou wrestled Inoki, Rocca

refereed, and I was the wide-eyed kid from Alabama who was in Japan for the first time. Lou was married, I was invited by the promotion, and it was an amazing world. I had heard Rocca stories and most were funny and lacked respect for his talent. However, when I met him, he was cordial, a bit rough around the edges, and a new experience for me. That also was the first time I ever exerted my personality into Lou's business.

Rocca joined us at the hotel coffee shop for breakfast early one morning after the match. The hospitality from the promotion had been overwhelming. My plane ticket had cost $5,000, as had Lou's, but he was working. The Keio Plaza was luxurious and welcoming, all expenses were paid. While Lou expected this, I was way out of my element. At breakfast, Tony started in on the Japanese. He was not complimentary, and I was getting uncomfortable. I had played chef for Tony when the promotion had taken us all to a Korean restaurant, where we had a hibachi to cook the marinated raw meat. Tony was not as accustomed

to cooking his own food, so I cooked his food, my food, and – of course – Lou's food. So, I had a certain familiarity and comfort level with Tony. I listened to insults and derogatory remarks about my host until I could take no more. I was very sweet when I said, "Tony, you know I love you, but ... the Japanese promotion paid my way here, paid for my hotel, and paid for my food. The Japanese people have been more gracious than I knew possible. I am really uncomfortable listening to you degrade them." Now I was uncomfortable because Lou was kicking me under the table. Lou only liked confrontation in a ring. Tony looked at me, blushed a bit, apologized sincerely, and asked if he could stay if he quit making nasty remarks. The rest of the meal was pleasant and fun. The outcome of the conversation seemed to appease Lou.

I knew Rocca had no wrestling talent. He was an acrobat exploited by promoters who took advantage of wrestling fans. I got that part. When I read Lou's account of Rocca's history in his

book, I was shocked at the venom. Rocca was still alive and I could not imagine such descriptions being read by his fans ... or even Lou's fans. There were two images at stake here. Honestly, I had nothing vested in Rocca, but I feared Lou would regret his cruelty. The three of us (Lou, Kit and I) had some serious discussions, and it took me a while to see, and get Lou to see, how much he truly resented Rocca. It was not because of any personal encounter. It was what Lou perceived as his collusion with the "enemy." The enemy was the money-grubbing promoters who used and abused the boys, the fans, and the integrity of Lou's profession. Lou was angry with Rocca because he was not smart enough to see he was being used. Rocca was paid very little, but his handlers convinced him he was overpaid. When it came right down to it, Rocca had given aid and comfort to Lou's "enemy," and Lou had harbored that resentment and anger for many, many years. What I couldn't see was the big picture. Rocca had perpetrated no evil plot on Lou. He was "dumb" enough to be a pawn in an evil plot against

professional wrestling. Lou saw him as someone who came into his world and never respected it. He needed to realize: Rocca could not respect what he never understood. I could see the change in Lou when his mind went from Rocca being a dirty S.O.B. to a "poor bastard."

I never questioned whatever he wanted to say about Toots Mondt, and I never messed with his classic description of Toots. "The son of a bitch would steal the cream out of your coffee!" From what little knowledge I had of those long ago years, I got the impression Mondt knew what he was doing to professional wrestling and the wrestlers. He just didn't give a damn about anyone but Toots. What I found fascinating was Ed Lewis' very close friendship with Mondt. Lou worshipped Ed, wanted to grow up to be Ed, but even Ed could never convince him that Toots Mondt had even one decent bone in his body. Lou would agree with Ed on only one count. Mondt knew the wrestling business.

Kit was a good sport, but I know he was wondering who this bossy broad was. Actually, it was Lou's business manager. Usually, Lou was my lover and my partner, but as we so often joked, he also was the "product." For the public to see a cruel and angry product was not good for anyone, and especially if it were not genuine. I saw Lou angry on a few occasions, but I never saw him cruel.

I am still as amazed at Kit's professionalism as his talent as a writer, but his patience was surely tested. He liked the attitude toward Rocca, and he understood it as Lou's anger at how Rocca hurt professional wrestling and all the "boys" who worked hard to perpetuate wrestling. What I didn't think about was his contribution; he had written that part of the story. Now he had to rewrite.

Kit and Lou continued their ups and downs and intermittent intensity; more yellow legal paper, more audio cassettes, more phone calls, and more

time passed. I was embroiled in a career change which was all consuming and Lou was not accustomed to me being more focused on anything. I had always been his primary focus. The money was decent, and I loved the challenge, but it was very time consuming. Lou was working on the book with Kit, but he was moody. I was exerting my independence and we didn't connect on all levels as "usual" in our relationship. This went on for a little less than a year. When he was in Japan, I had some time to think, and I resigned my position. I was always impulsive, so it took me a couple of days to think about what I would tell Lou. I did wait until he came back to the States, and as we waited at the airport waiting for his luggage, I told him. His response was instant, calm, and so genuine; "Thank God!" My instincts had been right on the money. He never resented me having a career, as long as it was secondary. I had learned my lesson.

Our freedom was short lived when we learned my mother had pancreatic cancer and would

undergo chemotherapy. We lived in Virginia, Mother lived in Adamsville, Alabama, and my brother and his wife lived about 20 miles from Mother with their five-year-old daughter. Dad had died 15 years earlier. Mother needed me, and when I decided it would be easiest for me to be there with her, Lou came along ... and the two of them drove me crazy! They were like two children vying for my attention. I was conflicted every moment and I felt like I wasn'ot being fair to either of them, so I packed us up and Lou and I went home for a couple of days.

Kit had pretty much finished the book and Lou was doing the editing. Lou's only complaint with the book was "in the business." I found this a phenomenon with people involved with professional wrestling, but not wrestlers. Well, maybe some wrestlers, too, used "the business" much too frequently. It is almost as if the use of the words was a secret handshake. I rarely heard Lou use the phrase, and he did not like it used so often. So-ooo, I packed up my computer and the

floppy disks (no hard drive at that time) Kit had sent me and went back to my Mother's. I would print the pages and mail them to Lou. Lou would make his changes, mail them back, and I would edit the text and mail the disk to Kit . I removed several (probably too many) references to "the business" from the manuscript. Lou substituted "the industry" in some places, and in others, just took out the words. (My pet peeve was the word "that." My Mother was an English teacher and we were "cautioned," as only a Mother can do, against the overuse of the word. So that was my contribution.

By accident, I deleted two chapters and had to retype them. I hate to type! Then I found a wonderful computer geek who told me to call him if I did it again and he could retrieve it. I did ... and he did. It was only money.

Mother slept a good part of the day, so I worked on the book and would call Lou to check notes or remind him when to buy the lottery tickets. It was

his way of letting me know he missed me. He was such a jewel through the months I was with Mother. He loved the lottery and the chance for big money was drawn on Wednesday and Saturday. The minor money was Tuesday and Thursday. He would (not entirely in jest) ask me every day, "Do I buy a ticket today?" I would be furious and say, "Write it down!"

I was with Mother off and on for about five months. She was her quirky self, even though she knew she was dying. When Mother felt stronger, I would go home for a week, and later come back. Mother was always thanking me and Lou for the luxury of being able to stay in her own home. Life offered me a golden opportunity to spend such extraordinary time with a remarkable woman. Lou was loving and gracious about me accepting that gift. When we moved Mother to my brother's home, we were looking for a nursing home. I was no longer qualified to care for her. Lou and I were just walking in the door of our home in Virginia when my brother called to let us

know Mother was in the hospital. We went back to Alabama the next day and I had more time and more fun with Mother in the hospital. I had the advantage of having spent months with her and her cancer. I knew she was ready, and she had prepared me to let her go. I had forgotten Lou had not had the same preparation. He was devastated when she died. They were such dear friends, and although she was only three years younger than Lou, he always called her Mother.

I tell you all of this, mostly because it all came back to me, and because the process of Hooker was what kept me connected to Lou during a bittersweet time in our lives. Hooker gave us a positive forward focus. It was God sent.

From there, Kit took the book, and the rest has been a checkered past and bizarre goings on (some of my own making). Now Hooker is in the hands of Kit and Scott Teal.

Scott Teal was part of my introduction to

wrestling in Nashville, Tennessee. Lou and I both liked Scott from the first day we met him. We liked all the young men who held a fascination for professional wrestling and were willing to work hard and do whatever needed to be done. The difference with Scott was his fascination was based in fact, not fantasy. He loved professional wrestling for what it really was. When interacting with one of the wrestlers, he saw the person, not the ring persona. He also saw the big picture, saw how it all worked, and found a way to make it run more smoothly. I have always thought of Scott as a "kid" because that was how Lou saw him. In a conversation a while back, Scott reminded me — I was pretty much a "kid" at that time, too. It seems we both "grew up" in professional wrestling at the same time, in the same place. My perspective was from where Lou Thesz stood, but Scott has maintained his objectivity and respect for many years. We lost touch with most of the guys from the Nashville days, but were continually blessed with Scott's friendship and support. It seems fitting he is part of Hooker's development.

Kit has taken Hooker a step further and involved one of professional wrestling's most knowledgeable historians, J Michael Kenyon. J Michael [JMK] has edited and, no doubt, "corrected" a few "errors" Lou made in the recounting of his life. I have always found this amusing where historians are concerned, and JMK was my first encounter with the phenomenon. In the very early days of the AOL Grandstand forum, Lou was asked a question and he answered. In a few days, we received a rebuttal from JMK, who offered a different story told by a deceased wrestler's wife and corroborated by the newspaper. The correspondence became contentious ... and nothing was really resolved. Lou had his story and he was sticking to it, and JMK had his story and stood his ground. I remember personally telling JMK how much I admired him for his search for the "truth," considering the fact that he had to depend on the stories told by men (and women) who had been dropped on their heads for a living, and which were backed up by the newspaper accounting of

the matches in newspaper which were "put to bed" before the matches ever began. As you can imagine, when I met JMK, I was cautious, but not Lou. He enjoyed and respected him from day one. Lou had an easy and rich laugh, and no one could evoke it quicker than JMK. My concern JMK did not show the proper respect faded into, "If Lou isn't concerned, why should I be?" Lou never really took himself seriously, and JMK was a partner in the irreverence.

I know some changes have been made to Lou's recollections, and I feel the urge give my perspective. Historians love to think they "catch" the boys in untruths. I have the ultimate respect, and in some cases, affection, for the guys who pour through dusty old newspapers, microfilm, old letters and tall tales from widows, sons and distant relatives to extract their truth. While I have dumped this dilemma in Kit's lap, I am going to add my two-cents worth (you don't really have to pay two cents!) Promoters not only controlled the boys, but they controlled the newspapers and what

was printed. The results were very often printed before the bell rang because the "press" had an early "bedtime" in order to get the papers on the street. It wasn't collusion, it was convenience. Well, collusion of convenience. Many, many of the stories told were enhanced memories and products of long road trips, bar stool conversations, and egos. Some, however, were stories only the participants and present fans know. When guys could not make it, and subs were made, the "record" did not reflect that. I remember Lou casually mentioning "going in for" a guy who was sick, or others "going in for" another guy. There were times he was booked with one guy and wrestled another.

On the other hand, I do know Lou got things wrong. My gosh! I was his wife for 26 years. It was my JOB to point out those lapses ... and in front of anyone who was present! I just want to say, where there is a difference in facts, Lou has a chance of being right, and it was his life. I love you, Kit, and I am sorry I dumped this on you. I

know you loved Lou, too. I do know he was immensely proud of the job you did and the final product. I also know he would be proud of this edition ... and damned glad he didn't have to work on it.

Foreword by Kit Bauman

An autobiography, according to the mysterious wit known as Franklin P. Jones, is a literary form that "usually reveals nothing bad about its writer except his memory."

Another writer, the British barrister and biographer Philip Guedalla, called the form "an unrivaled vehicle for telling the truth about other people."

It's actually both, and Lou Thesz almost certainly would have laughed and nodded in agreement if he had read those observations. His memory was certainly called into question by some who read

this book when it was first published in the early 1990s, and he also was attacked by some who believed he "padded his own part" with critical comments about some of his fellow pro wrestlers and the promoters who gave them work.

Lou should be forgiven on both counts. He was in his seventies when we began work on the book — I provided the questions and he sought to provide the answers — and he said on more than one occasion he simply didn't remember the details I was seeking. It was frustrating for him because he realized the errors would reflect on him and his good-faith effort to tell his story honestly.

Another factor was the very nature of the pro wrestling industry and its casual relationship with facts, as well as a lifelong habit of sticking to his story, whether it was true or not. In an incomplete rough draft of the book he'd written before my involvement in it, Lou addressed what is a very widespread human condition: telling a falsehood

so often that one comes to believe it's true. What he said was this (the italics are mine):

"Over the years, when talking to reporters, I have credited my father with teaching me how to wrestle. I've told the story so often that the truth now seems wrong. The fact is, Pop was never a wrestler. He had learned enough in Hungary to show me the exercises, but he never really understood how a wrestling move or a hold worked. I am forever indebted to him for introducing me to what became my life. I am forever indebted to him, too, for his support in the early years, when he saw wrestling as a sport, not a business. I will always love and respect his memory, but Pop died the 'world's champion' of wrestling fans. (And, as long as I'm on an honesty streak, I might as well tell you: I very rarely, if ever, did all the sit-ups, Hindu squats or other exercises I claimed when talking to the press. I also smoked cigars, until I wised up and quit in the 1960s, and I was a two-fisted drinker for a long, long time.)"

As for the readers who thought he was unkind in his assessments of several people … well, Lou just shrugged them off. Some readers who were wrestling fans simply didn't like his depiction of their heroes, many of them deceased by then, and he understood that. Still, his attitude was summed up in the book by a comment he made about one particularly sleazy promoter who also was dead by then: "I learned long ago that someone who was a sonofabitch in life was still a sonofabitch when he was dead."

That he was, nevertheless, proud of the final product is a certainty. The book was ground-breaking, in that it was the first by a prominent pro wrestler to break "kayfabe," the code of silence practiced for decades by those in the industry when discussing their profession with outsiders. Certainly, other wrestlers had written their autobiographies by then, but almost all of them presented pro wrestling as a legitimate sport. Lou was determined to present an honest, warts-and-all, depiction of his career, the first

major star to do so, and he was especially pleased when he became aware of praise from an unexpected direction: from some university academics who discovered the book and pronounced it a valuable and revealing document about an interesting segment of American pop culture.

For my part, I was the primary beneficiary of our collaboration because Lou and I became close friends, and it was a privilege to "break bread" with the man, an expression of respect and affection he used in describing the people he cared about. We'd met backstage in 1983 at a wrestling show in Fort Worth, Texas, where Lou was appearing as a guest referee. I was editing a Dallas newspaper at the time and had been researching the pro wrestling scene in Texas for a book I hoped to write. It was a cordial encounter, and Lou said he'd be happy to discuss his experiences as a wrestler in Texas, so we exchanged phone numbers and went our separate ways.

Several months later, I got a call from Lou in which he said he'd been thinking about writing his autobiography. He said he'd approached a prominent wrestling writer — Dave Meltzer, whose Wrestling Observer newsletter was still in its infancy — and Lou asked him if he would be willing to collaborate with him on a book. Meltzer begged off, but he suggested Lou call me, because he knew I was interested in the history of pro wrestling and was already semi-educated about its realities. I was flattered to be asked … but, honestly, my first thought was that Lou would be very useful to me in terms of the Texas book I was trying to write. I accepted his invitation. It couldn't be that hard or time-consuming to knock out an autobiography, I reasoned, and I'd be able to work on, and improve, my Texas project at the same time.

That was the beginning of an effort that now has consumed the better part of a quarter century. Lou and his wife, Charlie, were living in Norfolk, Virginia, at the time, so I flew there to discuss the

book and figure out our approach. Our agreement, sealed with a handshake, was a simple one: a 50/50 split of whatever profits might come our way from our collaboration.

Our biggest hurdle was the first one: how to approach Lou's story. I'd been around enough pro wrestlers by then to realize how well protected the wrestling business was, and I figured Lou, who'd spent a lifetime defending his profession as a credible, competitive sport, would stick to that story … which was fine with me. I still assumed my contribution was going to be little more than copying down what Lou had to say and then typing it up. In other words, a quick-hitter. I was thinking I'd do the job and then be back at work on my own book in short order.

Obviously, it didn't work out that way, and I'm forever indebted to Lou for taking the leap. Deciding to tell his story and discuss his profession in an honest, open manner could not have been easy for him … but he certainly made it

seem that way. I remember the moment when I realized what he was proposing to do. It was the first full day of my visit, and we were seated outside, taking in the sun on his deck overlooking the Chesapeake Bay, and talking about his early days as a pro wrestler. He was relating a story about some especially-revealing incident. No, I don't remember exactly what it was, but I was startled by his honesty and directness, and I asked him if he was sure he wanted to tell it that way. He paused for a moment … and then said, "Yeah. What's the point of telling my story if I'm not going to tell the truth?"

At the time of our conversation, in 1983, professional wrestling in the United States was engaged in the early stages of what became a nationwide, scorched-earth war that killed the old system of regional promotions, and eventually ended with a single wrestling company, today's WWE, Vince McMahon's company. Lou said it was obvious to him the kayfabe era was ending — cable TV had a lot to do with that — and he

recognized the real history of his profession was much more interesting than maintaining the old fiction. That's when I realized I had a big project on my hands and wouldn't be resuming work on the Texas book anytime soon … if ever.

I spent two or three days with Lou and his wife, Charlie, most of that time interviewing him, and returned to Dallas to begin transcribing my notes. Given the physical distance between us, we worked out an arrangement whereby I would write or call Lou with my questions, and he would reply by recording his responses on cassette tapes and mailing them to me for transcribing. (I later learned from Charlie that Lou would write out his responses in longhand on a yellow legal pad before recording them. He did a lot of homework, too; in many cases, where he couldn't clearly remember the details of what he was trying to relate, he'd get on the phone and reminisce with old acquaintances about what they recalled. It was a fun exercise for him, too, because it put him back in touch with many people whom he hadn't seen or

talked with in years.)

Our central problem in moving the book forward was exclusively mine; I had to earn a living, which limited the amount of time I could spend working on the book. My personal life had become a mess — a painful divorce, in addition to a collapsing economy in Texas that saw my newspaper go out of business — so, in 1987, I relocated to Florida to accept a job. Lou and I continued to get together whenever we could, two or three times mostly, but the book was a struggle because each interview or conversation with Lou generated even more questions, and I began to worry that we'd never finish the job.

Finally, in 1991, we caught a break, if you can call it that: I got laid off. I'd been working in Tallahassee as the bureau chief of United Press International's capitol bureau for a couple of years, but the proud ol' company had been struggling to survive for a long time, and the decks were awash with red ink when the word came

down: The company was seeking bankruptcy protection, and a number of us were "furloughed," as UPI put it. Actually, I was semi-delighted, because I could sense Lou's frustration with the pace of writing the book, and I was anxious to wrap it up, too. I took UPI's pitiful little severance package, filed for unemployment, and began writing Hooker at home. Once I'd found a rhythm, it actually became fun. Whenever I was in the car, running an errand or whatever, I was listening to Lou's taped recollections on the cassette player. I was driving back and forth to St. Louis several times a year, too, to visit my daughter, and I would listen to the tapes during the drive, discovering new things with each listening and polishing in my head what we'd already written. (I also became a regular at the downtown public library in St. Louis, poring through the microfilm records of the city's newspapers, reconstructing Lou's early days in that city, his hometown, as a pro wrestler.) At the end of four months of work, we finally had a manuscript.

Our greatest disappointment with the book was one we encountered early: our inability to find a mainstream publisher. An old friend in the newspaper business, by then established as a "true crime" writer, suggested we contact his agent — who turned out to be a wrestling fan and was keen to represent Lou Thesz. He agreed with us that our primary audience for the book would be what we called "the AARP crowd," since they were the ones old enough to have lived through pro wrestling's "golden age" — the post-World War II years through the mid-1950s — when wrestling was a staple of the early TV networks and Lou was a very visible star.

It took almost a year for the agent to toss in the towel. The big problem with our book, he finally said, is the major publishing houses had no respect for pro wrestling or its audience. "They believe that 'those people' don't buy books," he reported to us. "If I've heard it once, I've heard it a hundred times. Some of them even said most of 'those people' can't even read." He was genuinely

disappointed, but business is business, so he cut us loose. Lou and I tried pitching the book ourselves, and we had more than one session with representatives of smaller publishing houses, but the response was virtually identical to what the agent had found.

What was heartening was that the people on the editorial side almost always loved the book and Lou's stories of his colorful life, and wanted to publish it. Invariably, though, the marketing people opposed it, saying it would never sell. (In a way, their opposition was understandable, because the marketing people were dealing exclusively with numbers, and the track record of books about pro wrestling was not good. Here's an excellent example of what we encountered: In the mid-1980s, a publishing house in Dallas was interested enough in the book to invite me and a literary agent friend of mine to pitch the book to its team. We met with maybe a dozen people, including the owner of the company, and the people from the editorial side loved what we had

to say. The owner liked the idea, too; he was an older guy, another Lou Thesz fan, and he wanted the book. However, the company had recently published a glossy "biography" of wrestling's Von Erich boys, who were an extremely hot commodity in North Texas during the early to mid-1980s, and it had not sold well. A writer friend who provided the copy for the book — in his own words, "a piece of fiction and teen-idol fandom" that was typical of what was being published about pro wrestling in those days — told me later, "They took a major bath on the book. Their warehouse is full of unsold copies that they'll never unload. They thought the photos alone would sell a lot of copies, but they were wrong.")

So we finally had a book, but no one was interested in buying it. We decided to shelve it for a while and take a break.

It might have stayed there, but in 1991, we discovered the Internet. By then, I was working for the State of Florida as a contract employee,

editing a monthly newspaper for the Department of Elder Affairs. One day, I arrived home from work to find in my mailbox a cardboard mailer containing a computer disk from America Online. The mailing offered me 60 minutes of access, free, to try their site, and I was curious enough to take the disk to work the next day. (I had owned a home computer since 1985, but I used it exclusively for word processing. I didn't even know what a modem was.)

I showed the disk to one of the computer techs at the Department of Elder Affairs. She was curious enough herself about the AOL offer to take the disk to the only computer in the building that had a modem and install the program. What we discovered astounded and excited us, and others in positions of influence within the department were quick to see the possibilities, too. Within a matter of months, the entire department — much of Florida state government, in fact — had been wired for Internet access.

One evening after work, while surfing around the Internet, I stumbled across a message board (sorry, I don't remember its name) devoted to pro wrestling. It was literally the first time I realized there were others out there with a knowledge of and respect for the "sport," and I became an avid reader. I soon discovered a collection of sports-related message boards on AOL itself, one of them devoted to pro wrestling, and I mentioned it to Lou during one of our telephone conversations as something that might prove useful to us in creating interest in our book. He and Charlie soon had their own home computer, with Internet access, and it was an easy step from there to approaching AOL and asking if they'd be interested in having Lou host a forum wherein he would tell stories about his career and answer questions from the readers.

AOL jumped on the offer with genuine enthusiasm, and compensated Lou and Charlie by giving them unlimited free access to their service. The Lou Thesz forum was an immediate hit, and we used our presence there to pitch the fact

that Lou had written a book, thinking a major publishing house might see our posts — and the enthusiastic audience on the forum for Lou's stories — and offer to publish it. Nothing happened, though, not even a nibble. But we'd certainly created interest in the book among the fans on the forum, and we were reading post after post in which readers would express their enthusiasm for the book and encourage us to keep looking for a publisher. It was a circular and frustrating exercise.

Finally, one day I suggested to Lou, more out of desperation than anything else, that we might as well try self-publishing the book. We didn't have the resources to do a quality job — we'd been dreaming from the first about a hardback book with lots of photos — but I pointed out to Lou that we could easily copy the typewritten manuscript and have it bound at Kinko's for little money if we did it on a copy-by-copy basis. Lou said we might as well try it and make a buck while we could, so that's what we did. We decided on a price ($25,

check or money order only, if I remember correctly) and posted the order information on the AOL board and other Internet sites. Orders began to trickle in, and we set up an assembly line of sorts. When we got an order, I'd stay late at work and, when no one was around, make a copy of the manuscript on one of the Department of Elder Affairs' copying machines. (It sounds silly, perhaps, but I was careful to use copy paper that I'd purchased. That was my convoluted way of justifying to myself that I wasn't engaged in a "theft of government services.") I'd then take the manuscript to a nearby Kinko's and have it bound with a paper or plastic cover. The bound copies — we produced no more than one or two at time — would be mailed to Lou, along with the name and address of the buyer, and Lou would autograph the title page and put it in the mail to the purchaser. It was admittedly an inefficient system, so Lou and Charlie soon took over the reproduction, binding, and mailing operation entirely at their end.

(The only "big" money we ever made with the book came when Koji Miyamoto, who was very close to Lou and Charlie, and served very ably over the years as Lou's representative in Japan, sold it to a Japanese publishing house. The manuscript was translated into kanji, and the result was exactly the sort of product we'd originally hoped to see in the United States: a hard-back with lots of photos. The book did very well in Japan, spending several weeks near the top of the bestseller list there.)

That should have been the end of our efforts, but the Internet wouldn't let us rest. Almost from the moment the book was released, we began to see messages on the various boards from "smart" fans and serious researchers pointing out typos, and questioning or criticizing details in the book. The typos were especially annoying, but they were the natural byproduct of having to do all the work ourselves. Anyone who's spent any amount of time with their own writing knows that the longer you look at your printed words, the less likely you are

to see a mistake, so we gave ourselves something of a pass on that account. Besides, since we were still selling the book on a copy-by-copy basis, it was an easy matter to go into the original document every time we got an order and fix the typos (we never got all of them). I'd also delete or revise things that Lou and I were dissatisfied with, and the result is we ended up with more than one version of the book. (Some readers believe there is an early version out there with lots of stories about Lou's and other wrestlers' sexual escapades. It's not true … although it would have been easy to do. Lou was very open in talking about his and other wrestlers' active sex lives, but he left it to me to decide which stories belonged in the book, and I was stingy about what got included. Some of the stories, while often hilarious, went beyond a triple-X rating, and some of them, in my mind, might have been hurtful to the wives, widows, and children of the wrestlers themselves, so it was easy to leave them out.)

Correcting the mistakes or misrepresentations in

the book was a different matter entirely. Lou's position was that the book was his version of his pro wrestling career, the way he remembered it, and we had done our best to get it right. In other words, readers could take it or leave it. My attitude was different. I was bothered by those elements in the book that a little research proved were off the mark, because I believed they reflected on Lou's credibility … not to mention my research skills. I wanted to fix them, but neither Lou nor I was anxious to revisit the book and devote time to rewriting it. We'd moved on to other things by then and had no energy for such a project. Besides, no one had come forward with a financial offer adequate enough to make it worth our efforts, so we simply decided to let the debates about details go on without us on the Internet's message boards. (In 2001 or thereabouts, a guy named Chris Newman printed a limited number of copies in paperback and sold them — all of them, as I recall — through Amazon.com, but that was the last effort to make the book available.)

Any lingering thoughts of a rewrite appeared to evaporate for good on April 28, 2002, when Lou Thesz died in an Orlando, Florida, hospital from complications following heart surgery. Only four days earlier, he'd observed his 86th birthday. His passing couldn't have come as a bigger shock to those of us who were close to the man, because here was a guy who cared about his health and was a workout fanatic all his life. His mother had lived an active life well into her nineties, and it seemed a certainty that Lou would do it, too. His three sisters, as of this writing in February 2011, are still living, each in their nineties.

It's a fact about the human condition, however, that interest in a celebrity's life and work almost always spikes for a while when that person dies. That's certainly what happened with Lou and Hooker. Friends and wrestling fans had been nagging us for years to make the book available again, and with Lou's passing, the volume of calls and emails only increased. It became simply a matter of time before we actually did it, and this

book is the result — an update, not a wholesale rewrite.

An important question, however, had to be resolved before we undertook the job: Is it ethical to revise and rewrite someone else's account of their own life? What we eventually decided is that Lou wouldn't mind if we fixed what we knew was erroneous. Some of the dates that appeared in the original manuscript have been corrected, and some of the details — the stories themselves — have been rewritten or revised to incorporate information we didn't have at the outset. A lot of material that was cut from the book during its various incarnations has been restored, and some stories and details that have never appeared before — mostly because we were trying to control the size of the book — are now included.

Some aspects of the book simply could not be adjusted without losing the flavor of what Lou was trying to relate, however, so we've either deleted certain details or added endnotes to correct or

elaborate upon what originally appeared. (A lot of readers will hate the idea of endnotes — and it was hotly debated at our end — but the information included as endnotes simply could not be incorporated in another way. The use of footnotes was certainly discussed, but many of the additions are so lengthy and detailed that they would have broken the flow of what Lou wrote, so we made a tough call.)

Chapter Four, the one about Ed (Strangler) Lewis, deserves special mention here. To refresh Lou's memory about much of the historical detail, Lou and I relied on an interesting, but seriously flawed, book from the 1930s called Fall Guys: The Barnums of Bounce. Critics were quick to point out where we — and Fall Guys author, Marcus Griffin — had things wrong. We've corrected a lot of what we could, but much of the chapter defies fixing. It was Lou's homage to his mentor, hero, and great friend, and he was proud of it, so for that reason, it remains largely intact. Anyone seeking a more full accounting of Ed Lewis'

remarkable life is urged to read the chapter about him in Tim Hornbaker's authoritative book, National Wrestling Alliance, and to keep an eye out for historian Steve Yohe's record book devoted to Lewis (at this writing, still in progress), some of which appears in piecemeal fashion on the Lou Thesz message board at wrestlingclassics.com.

Acknowledgments are a risky business because it seems inevitable someone will be overlooked. I'm willing to take the risk, though, and accept both the blame and the responsibility for omissions because some contributions simply cannot go unspoken.

First and foremost, of course, is Charlie Thesz. If she ever wavered from her desire to see this book made available again, I never saw a sign of it, and she is the one person most responsible for the fact it exists. She is the true "keeper of the flame" for Lou Thesz, and the day she told me in so many words to "go ahead and write what you

want" — she resisted, for a long time, because she agreed with Lou's view that his version of his life was the official one — was the day this project came back to life for me.

Scott Teal, our publisher, certainly belongs near the top of the "thank-you" list, too, for obvious reasons. This book simply would not have happened without him, and his enthusiasm and encouragement were vital throughout the revision process. Lou was very fond of Scott and his family, and he'd be pleased that it was Scott who made the book available again.

Scott also deserves extra applause because it was he who enlisted prominent wrestling researcher/historian, writer, and all-around colorful guy J Michael Kenyon as the book's editor. If it's not clear by now, an actual editor is something Hooker never had in its many earlier incarnations, and J Michael's contribution was literally priceless.

I used to think of myself as a pretty decent researcher, but J Michael sobered me on that point long ago: after I came across some of his work on the Internet. The breadth and depth of his knowledge about pro wrestling's history is incredible and I'm grateful to have been the beneficiary of it. If I ever encountered a more demanding and competent editor during my forty-plus years in journalism, then time has really dulled my memory more than I realize. Working with J Michael has been both a pleasure and an honor.

(It helped a lot, too, that J Michael was a great fan of Lou's and knew a lot about his career, which I learned firsthand. Lou and I had gotten together in St. Louis, in 1989, as I recall, when he and Charlie were visiting Lou's sister there and I was in town to spend time with my daughter. Lou said he had someone he wanted me to meet, so, on the day Lou and Charlie were supposed to catch a flight back home to Norfolk, I met them at their hotel and was introduced to J Michael, who was

coming through town on business of his own and had arranged to meet Lou. During the hour or so we spent chatting in the lobby of the hotel, J Michael was relentless in questioning Lou about his career. I could see immediately he clearly knew a lot of things about Lou that I had not yet learned, so I sat there quietly and soaked up what I could, figuring I'd follow up on my own later. A couple of weeks later, Lou and I were chatting on the phone and I mentioned our conversation with J Michael. "He was pretty tough on you," I said to Lou, laughing. "Yeah," Lou replied, "but I don't mind because he's genuinely interested in the history of pro wrestling. He respects it, and that means a lot to me.")

The list gets especially crowded when trying to thank the people we met through the various message boards on the Internet. In a way, they're the ones who really did the legwork for fixing the original book by pointing out errors and pressing us for more details through their questions and comments. Our debt to them is immense and can

never be repaid. Crimson Mask was one of the earliest supporters of the book — "He's got my back," Lou once said in recounting how Crimson Mask had risen to his defense more than once on the various Internet message boards — and was always willing to share information and encourage us to improve what we had. Important researcher/historians, writers, Internet moderators, and newsletter editors like Dave Meltzer, Don Luce, Steve Yohe, Fred Hornby, Tim Hornbaker, Libnan Ayoub, Jim Melby, Mark Nulty, Mike Chapman, Ed Garea, and Ken Sandler were unselfish with their assistance and provided us with many contacts and useful tidbits that otherwise would not have come our way.

One of the special delights for me in researching the book was meeting and talking with many of the old-time wrestlers themselves. It was Lou who opened the door by vouching for me and encouraging them to help us. As a result, I was able to spend time — usually on the phone, sometimes in person, but always cordial — with

such legends as Johnny Valentine, Dick Hutton, Wladek (Killer) Kowalski, George Gordienko, Dr. Bill Miller, Gene Kiniski, Nick Bockwinkel, Jack Brisco and many others. Promoter Sam Muchnick also was approachable, thanks to Lou, but he was a very tough nut to crack when it came to extracting facts and figures. He practiced kayfabe to the end of his life, and, while it was frustrating for me, I came to respect him for it. Muchnick's former right-hand man, Larry Matysik, was vital to helping me sort through and understand a lot of the internal workings of the National Wrestling Alliance and Muchnick's office. In Texas, promoters Paul Boesch, Fritz von Erich, and Joe Blanchard were patient with my inquiries over the years and very forthcoming with information.

And, finally, a very special shout-out goes to legendary wrestler Terry Funk, who first illuminated for me in the early 1980s much of pro wrestling's history and inner workings. It was Terry who, years ago, backstage at that Fort Worth show, insisted that I meet the great Lou Thesz, and

actually did the honors. It's a given that none of what followed likely would have happened without Terry's introduction, and I don't have the words to adequately express my appreciation to him and his family.

Chapter 1

Americans love their fantasies.

Why that's so has baffled me for many years, and I'm no closer to an answer today than I was when I first began wondering about it. I'm not saying the quality is altogether bad, because it's not. One writer described it as "an exercise bicycle for the mind," and I'd agree with that. What troubles and puzzles me, though, is when people retreat into their fantasies when they'd be better off dealing with reality and trying to think clearly about what they're faced with.

I know this quality is somehow related to the fact

that the general public is very easy to manipulate. No matter how deep the bullshit runs, people will buy it if it's presented forcefully and properly, and one has only to look to politics, televangelists, and advertising to see the truth. We cling to our myths.

I'm something of an authority on the subject, in all modesty. This appetite for fantasy created a product, and the product was pro wrestling, a profession I practiced for more than 60 years. We focused on that need and appealed to the prejudices of our "market," a fact that puts us right alongside those others.

It's easier for me to understand this strange trait when it comes to our enthusiasm for sports and athletes. Our culture emphasizes winning, and winning in athletics is more glamorized and admired — and, yes, hyped — than victory in any other field of endeavor. An athlete's skills are easy to admire, too, primarily because almost all of us as kids have attempted to win at these games

ourselves, and those efforts enable us to easily recognize someone with a special level of ability.

Even when we don't immediately recognize those abilities, the news media and marketing people are there to be sure we get the word. I tend to reserve judgment when I read or hear about sports heroes, though, because I was elevated to that level myself. I've been around sportswriters, editors, and marketing people since the mid-1930s, so I should understand them and their business by now. They are mere mortals, just like the rest of us — including the heroes they help manufacture — but their "opinions" can often be the difference between success and failure to an athlete.

Pro wrestling's critics bristle when people like me describe ourselves as professional athletes, and I can understand why they object. Their central complaint is that our business doesn't belong in the same category with America's other pro sports because it doesn't qualify on one simple but critical point: It's not a competitive

sport. And, although we insisted otherwise for years, that's absolutely true. What it actually is, simply stated, is sports entertainment.

What the critics choose to ignore, however, is the one essential point that links pro wrestling to baseball, football, basketball, and every other professional sport: They're all entertainments with an economic bottom line, and they're staged for no other reason than giving the paying customers a show. Once you sell a ticket to an athletic contest, it stops being a sport and becomes a business.

Pro wrestling became what it is in order to survive as a business, and that's really not so different than what the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association themselves have done over the years. Baseball's designated hitter, lively ball, shortened outfield fences, and lowered pitcher's mound; basketball's shot clock, three-point hoop, and dunk shot; football's annual rewrite of its rules (mostly adding restrictions upon defensive players

to give the offense a better chance to score points), even to changing the shape of the ball to make it easier to throw — all those changes and more were made for one simple reason: to provide the paying customers with a more exciting product that would keep them coming back for more.

Another area where the critics like to deride pro wrestling is its audience, which they see as exclusively lowbrow and violent. Sure, that element is very much a part of pro wrestling's following, but I'll guarantee you that same element is very much in evidence in the stands and at home in front of the TV when the NFL plays its games. Ever attended a pro hockey game or a horse race? Do you honestly believe that every basketball, baseball and football fan in America has a post-graduate degree, a six-figure income, and prefers Chablis to beer?

The biggest problem with the critics' viewpoint about pro wrestling's audience, aside from the outright snobbery and condescension, is that it's

the result of lazy reasoning, based upon only a slice of the spectrum. I can tell you this: During a career that has spanned 60 years and has taken me to every state in the union, to Mexico, Canada, Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, I've met not only thousands of average people who do not fit the critics' stereotype, I've also met movie stars, big-name entertainers, top business leaders, prominent judges and lawyers, famous athletes from other sports, dozens upon dozens of important political leaders — including one future president of the United States[1] — and even royalty. I never initiated those introductions, and I take immense pride in the fact that many of them were fans.

Pro wrestling is enormously popular and has a broad audience base because it has something to suit nearly every taste, and that's been true for a long time.[2] Dating back to the mid-1800s, it's one of America's oldest athletic entertainments and it wouldn't have endured if there hadn't been an appetite for the product. Television ratings alone prove the point: Pro wrestling competes

successfully with major league baseball on the tube (except for the playoffs and World Series) and consistently outdraws golf, tennis, boxing and bowling, to name only four mainstream sports that are offered regularly on TV. Check it out yourself if you don't believe me. And I've yet to see anything that would convince me any of those four sports has a fan base that rivals pro wrestling. What bothers the critics is that anyone would dare lump my business in with any of their hallowed sports — and what bothers me is that they completely miss the point. Pro sports are businesses, period.

Of course, when it comes to arguing about pro wrestling, the discussion always comes back to the same point: that it's a performance, and the others aren't. And I'll concede the point, too, if you can bring yourself to ignore all of the others where collusion has occurred in the past. Take boxing, for instance. I've known a lot of fighters and fight people over the years, including some of the greatest, like Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Rocky

Marciano, Muhammad Ali, and "Hammering" Henry Armstrong, and what I learned about their business convinced me that it's slimier, in terms of manipulation and double-dealing, than anything I ever encountered in my business. It's amazing to me that people, especially the sportswriters, still refuse to see it for what it is.

(I once sat with former heavyweight champion Joe Louis and Red Smith, the legendary New York sports columnist, at a title fight in the 1950s that ended with one of the "combatants" taking an obvious dive. Smith was never a fan of my business, but he was always friendly and courteous to me — maybe it was because I was from St. Louis, where he'd begun his newspaper career in 1928 — and he was man enough to admit it when he was wrong, which he was that night. Before the fight, Louis and I had heard that the fix was in, and we had shared that information with Red, but he refused to believe it, right up to the moment the flimsy finish actually occurred. When Red noticed Louis and me exchanging knowing looks, he had

the courtesy to laugh. This was an extremely bright man, one of the greatest of his profession, a Pulitzer-winning journalist, but he had wanted to believe in what he was seeing. He looked at me with a sheepish smile and said, "Lou, I'll never write an unkind word about your business again. At least you guys make it look convincing.")

I'll not concede anything to pro wrestling's critics, however, on the point of athleticism. Learning to perform a credible match is nothing less than an art form, something that requires genuine athletic skill. Pro wrestling has long had its share of fat boys, freaks, masked men, and carnival acts, people who relied on a gimmick or colorful personality to get the fans' attention, but the solid core of the business — until recent years, anyway — has always been the boys who could perform convincingly. And it's not an easy skill to acquire. I can name a lot of great athletes from other sports — Joe Louis is just one who immediately comes to mind, probably because I helped train him — who tried their hand at my

business, only to find they couldn't master it.

What we did in the ring comes closest to being described as a strenuous form of extemporaneous theater. It's actually very simple, in concept. We'd agree beforehand in the dressing room about what we wanted to do, just the length of time that we'd go and who would win the match, and then we'd get into the ring and do it. The key to a successful match — the goal, in fact — was getting the fans to react to what we were doing, and we'd talk to each other throughout the match to achieve it. This was the real contest, too. The "winner" wasn't the wrestler whose hand was raised at the end, but the one whose performance stuck in the minds of the fans as they headed home after the matches, the performer they would pay good money to see again, regardless of whether they hated or admired how he had behaved in the ring.

I love competitive, amateur-style wrestling, and it was my devotion to the sport as a youngster that

got me into pro wrestling in the first place. But I'll be the first to admit that an authentic wrestling contest between evenly matched opponents is almost always a deadly dull event to everyone except a dedicated student. In the early part of the 20th century, two of the greatest pro wrestlers in the history of the industry, Ed (Strangler) Lewis and Joe Stecher, wrestled three legitimate contests. The matches went a combined total of more than 11 hours before either man could score a fall, and virtually all of those minutes were spent warily stalking each other or locked together, almost unmoving, sometimes briefly on the mat. They were tremendous contests, but they had to be absolute boredom for the average paying customer to watch.[3]

It was matches like those, coupled with the public's appetite for action and excitement, which illustrate why the profit-oriented people in the business decided a more entertaining style was necessary if the business was going to survive. And the only way to accomplish that was

for the wrestlers to cooperate in their matches … to "work" with each other.

It was easily done; merely a matter of institutionalizing what had been going on in wrestling — and in sports in general — for centuries. Wrestling is an easy sport to manipulate; all it requires is one participant being willing to carry a lesser opponent or even lose. The same is true of any individual sport where no more than two contestants are matched, and I suspect it's always been that way. In 1957, while I was wrestling my way across Europe on a sort of working vacation, I spent a couple of days visiting Rome. The Colosseum was still open to tourists in those days, and as I stood on the floor of the arena, I found it easy to visualize the gladiators pitted against each other.

Athletes are athletes, and with the mutual respect many feel for each other, it wasn't unlikely that one gladiator might go easy on an opponent he respected and spare his life, maybe opting to

wound him rather than kill him. Frankly, anyone with even the slightest knowledge of human nature should find it easy to believe that predetermining the outcome of sporting events did not originate in the early 1900s with American-style pro wrestling. Doubters have only to look at the history of the Olympics, which historians tell us was plagued with manipulation and bribery from the very beginning, in 776 B.C., when the first games were staged as a religious spectacle.

And that's a clue to the other reason why American-style pro wrestling became a performance. From its earliest days as a mass entertainment, beginning after the Civil War, pro wrestling was the exclusive domain of showmen and con artists, people who were more interested in dollars than true sport. Impresarios like P.T. Barnum used wrestlers in their shows, having them wrestle exhibitions for the customers, and Barnum was one of the first to garb them in colorful costumes and create fictional biographies for them, merely a step in trying to generate publicity and

create interest. Under people like Barnum, pro wrestlers became performers, and that's what they've been ever since.

America also had any small traveling carnivals in those post-Civil War days that were the primary source of live entertainment for the masses. Most of them included what were called "AT shows" — short for "athletic shows" —in which wrestlers and boxers who would engage in exhibitions with other members of their troupe and take on customers in time-limit contests. Since the shows' proprietors and wrestlers were more interested in putting on a pleasing show than they were in staging a competitive contest, it was in those exhibitions that performing evolved. At no time was there more than a small handful of truly gifted wrestlers around, anyway — a point that's remained true through this century as well — so cooperation, with the better wrestler carrying his opponent, was the only way to make a match interesting. The idea, at all times, was to make the wrestling look absolutely credible to the ticket-

buyer, so the wrestlers gradually learned, through practice, an array of ways to put on a convincing performance.

It was an altogether different matter, though, when it came to the contests with "all comers," who were offered cash prizes if they could either pin the carnival's wrestler or stay with him until the time limit, usually 15 minutes, had expired. The carnies were not in business to lose money, so their troupes were always stocked with competent wrestlers and boxers who had little to fear from an unskilled "comer."

It was a risky proposition, however, because wrestling was an enormously popular sport during that era, especially in the Midwest, and there was always a chance that someone with real ability and knowledge of wrestling would come out of the crowd to try his hand against the carnival. The carnies needed an edge. What they came up with, over time, were called "hooks" — a collection of painful or crippling holds that were either

unknown or illegal in conventional competitive wrestling — and they used them when they came up against a challenger who appeared capable of stinging the carnival.

Barnstormers had a role in influencing how pro wrestling developed, too. Like the carnies, they were crafty people who lived by their wits as well as their athletic abilities, and they were primarily responsible for the concept of cooperating with an opponent. The barnstormers roamed the country around the turn of the century, promoting money matches for themselves against hometown wrestling heroes wherever they could find them, and their bottom line was the same as the carnies: money, not victories. Side bets were commonplace among spectators in those days, and if a barnstormer could secretly persuade his opponent to cooperate in the ring, both could make good money by quietly placing bets, usually through accomplices, on the underdog, whichever of them it turned out to be, and then seeing to it that the underdog won. If it was done convincingly, the

two men could stage a rematch and sting the marks all over again.

If a barnstormer found a town that looked particularly profitable, he might decide to "homestead," which meant to settle down there and earn a living by promoting wrestling matches for himself throughout the region with the locals or other barnstormers he would invite in. He had to be careful, though, when working with another barnstormer. If the town looked especially attractive to the visitor, he might decide to steal it for himself by double-crossing his host in the ring. Pro wrestling was — and remains today — an unregulated business, one in which it was literally every man for himself, and the wariness with which wrestlers learned to work with each other is another legacy of the barnstormers that has survived the years.

The carnies, the barnstormers, the impresarios — these were the people, not the athletes, who influenced how professional wrestling developed

during the second half of the 1800s, and they were the people who remained in control when the industry became more organized in the aftermath of World War I. Many of them came in from the road and became promoters, setting up offices in the country's largest cities and carving out territories for themselves, running regular cards on a region-wide basis. At the time, pro wrestling was so popular that only baseball overshadowed it, and a lot of people did very well financially. Newspapers and magazines helped enormously, reporting extensively on the matches, hyping the performers and, in the process, introducing them to a wider audience. (There were even trading cards of the wrestlers, and if you could find one today, it would be worth a fortune. The first ones appeared several years before the first baseball cards, which date back to 1886. Amateur programs, which had been all but nonexistent prior to 1900, sprang up all over the country, in universities, high schools and athletic clubs, thanks to pro wrestling's popularity.)

Between 1915 and 1920, pro wrestling went into a tailspin thanks in part to widespread newspaper publicity that for the first time was questioning pro wrestling's authenticity as a legitimate, competitive sport. Another critical factor was that pro wrestler Frank Gotch, America's first sports superstar, had retired a few years earlier, and no one had come along to replace him in the affections of either the fans or the sportswriters. Americans had discovered other diversions, too, like moving pictures, the continued rise of baseball (especially in the minor leagues), the advent of pro football and basketball, and the burgeoning interest in collegiate sports, and some critics predicted the business was doomed to extinction. In their minds, it had been only a craze, like six-day bicycle races.

Pro wrestling was simply regrouping, however, trying to find a way to survive, and the fact that it's still around today is evidence that the hustlers and promoters succeeded. What they did was simply get rid of competitive wrestling at the professional level. The fans craved excitement and dramatic

action, so the promoters decided to give it to them by performing every match. It was still possible to see an authentic contest among pro wrestlers when I came along in the 1930s, but they were rarities, the sort of thing the pros themselves would travel great distances to witness. But, despite what the old-timers liked to tell us kids in the dressing rooms, competitive pro wrestling — "shoots" or "contests" is what they were called — had pretty much died out during the late 1800s. Most of the contests I saw during my career took place in the gym during workouts, and the ones staged in front of paying customers were done to settle business disputes among rival wrestling groups. I had a few public contests myself during my career, but every one of them began as a performance that turned into a shoot due to a misunderstanding or an aggressive opponent who was looking to test me.

Pro wrestling is not the same business today that it was in the 1930s. When I broke in, authentic wrestling ability was what counted most, and the people inside the business doled out their respect

according to one's ability on the mat. There was a clear hierarchy within the ranks, and where you were ranked depended solely on how well you could handle yourself in a legitimate contest.

It was like a pyramid, with the largest group — the journeymen — on the bottom. These were the boys who had proven themselves as good performers and dedicated players. Some of them, not many, could even wrestle a little. They took their profession seriously, though, and, like other industries, served as its backbone. Many of them became big stars, but they never moved up the pyramid to the next level, which was the domain of the actual wrestlers, or "shooters," as they were called. The shooters were a small group of boys who were experts at their sport and could compete legitimately if the situation warranted it.

At the top of the pyramid, obviously, were the very elite — the hookers. These were the boys who had elevated their wrestling to the highest form and added a bagful of old carnival "hooks" to

their repertoire. Hooking requires a high level of wrestling knowledge, ability, and strength, and the few who were skilled enough to reach that level could do serious damage to an opponent, even a highly skilled shooter, with very little effort. They were truly dangerous men, and they enjoyed the highest respect within the dressing rooms and the promotion offices.

Today, that structure is only a memory, simply because there are now very few authentic wrestlers active in the business. As for hooking, it has become almost a lost art. There are only four or five of us still living who can claim membership in that group, and our active wrestling days are behind us.

One thing about the business that hasn't changed much is that it's a closed society. Today's performers don't "protect" the industry like we did, but that's primarily because they've already exposed it by relying on silly or downright ludicrous characters and gimmicks to gain

popularity with the fans. It was different in my day, when our product was presented as an authentic, competitive sport. We protected it because we believed it would collapse if we ever so much as implied publicly that it was something other than what it appeared to be. I'm not sure now the fear was ever justified given the fact that the industry is still in existence today, but the point is no one questioned the need then. "Protecting the business" in the face of criticism and skepticism was the first and most important rule a pro wrestler learned. No matter how aggressive or informed the questioner, you never admitted the industry was anything but a competitive sport.

Like other secret and semi-secret societies, our industry had its own language, some of it inherited directly from the carnivals. Every wrestler was a "boy" and every city was a "town." A "bump" was a spectacular fall, a "high spot" was an exciting or difficult move, and a "potato" was a hard punch that actually landed.

A lot of expressions were used, far too many to recount here, and it's an interesting fact about the business that it was the fringe element and so-called "smart" fans who adopted and used them most aggressively because it made them feel like they belonged. The boys who knew and respected themselves and their profession rarely used the lingo, and when they did, it was mostly to expedite communication with the fringe element and devoted fans. I never heard any of the greats, like Ed Lewis, Ray Steele, or George Tragos use the word "shoot." Ed would simply say, "Let's just wrestle."

Ribbing and practical jokes were a staple of the business, too, the source of legendary stories inside pro wrestling. I could fill a library with volumes of crazy, vulgar, wild, side-splitting, outrageous stunts and pranks without repeating a story. It was a loony business, filled with loony people, and I'm certain the gags were rooted in the principle that it's better to laugh than cry. Pro wrestling could be a brutal, heart-breaking

business, one that involved constant travel — always at your own expense, too, because you were an independent contractor — and dealing with unprincipled, carnival-spawned promoters who'd try their best to cheat you out of what you'd earned. You had to watch your back at all times because some of the wrestlers were pretty unprincipled people themselves, and most promotions had a stooge (usually some low-level performer who was trying to hang on in the business) whose job it was to cozy up to the boys and collect dirt the promoter could use against them.

We were almost always banged up with some ring injury (I've had something like 200 broken bones and fractures) because we wrestled several nights a week, and accidents did happen in the ring. We couldn't take time off to heal, though, because we didn't earn money when we weren't working. Our only hope was to put away a little money, bit by bit, from our payoffs, and that was hard for everyone but the top stars to do because

we never seemed to earn what we deserved, and our expenses ate up most of what we did get. There was no union, which meant no basic health coverage or life insurance, and we were such a high risk statistically that we couldn't afford the premiums even when we did find someone fool enough to sell us a policy.

Some promoters thought of us as little more than cattle, something to serve up to the fans, and they were indifferent to our problems. The only thing they cared about, aside from whether we drew any money for them, was getting us to the next town in time for the next night's card. As a result, the greatest hazard of our profession was the road, where we've lost more people than even the country-and-western music industry. I can't begin to list the number of wrestlers killed or maimed while traveling.

It's not hard to understand why. While arranging our next booking, a promoter would move his pencil half an inch on the map and send us a

thousand miles. Almost invariably, we would end up driving, usually late at night and at high speeds, nodding at the wheel, with another weary wrestler trying to catch some sleep in the back seat. It was treacherous, and it was numbingly monotonous. We would do anything to break the routine — play word games, have spelling contests, sing, and tell lies (far and away the most popular activity). Once in a while, we would buy overripe fruit from roadside stands and bomb innocent civilians along the way.

Sometimes we would risk life and limb, driving a long distance through treacherous weather, only to get to the town and find that our booking had been cancelled because of the wretched conditions we had just driven through. We were doubly screwed then, because our payoffs came exclusively from the gate receipts, and since we footed all of our own expenses, the cancellation meant we had not only driven all that distance for nothing, but we were out the money that we had spent to get there.

So what then was the appeal? What was the hold pro wrestling had on so many of us, that we would endure all that and much, much more — like a divorce rate that would shock most marriage counselors — and try to hang on?

Well, for starters, I suppose a lot of us were just gypsies at heart. It didn't start out that way for me, but in time, I came to see the idea of living a straight life, working nine to five for wages and a retirement plan, as abhorrent, a sign that I'd failed. We were free and independent, accountable to no one but ourselves, and there was a certain pride in living that way. We had a chance to see the world, too, in the company of some interesting and colorful characters, and we were received as celebrities in a lot of places. If you liked women ... well, believe me, there was never a lack of attractive company. And, if we caught a break or two, we could have all that and make money at it, too.

There's definitely something to be said for the

spotlight, as well. For some people in the business, it was the very best part. There's something addictive about performing in front of a crowd and knowing that you're entertaining them, that you've got them in the palm of your hand and can control their emotions. It's the same rush singers, actors, and other pro athletes experience, and just because "it's only pro wrestling" doesn't mean it isn't every bit as powerful.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, if you were an aggressive amateur wrestler like me, pro wrestling was the only place where you could continue to pursue your sport into your adult years. A lot of us, more than you'd imagine, followed that path, because we loved the competition and wanted to become the best we could. We didn't do our competitive wrestling at the arenas, of course, but we did pursue it at almost every available opportunity, seeking competition where we could find it, usually in workouts, sometimes against each other, and sometimes against top amateurs in the college

ranks. For some of us, this was the best part of the business, the reason for enduring all the rest, and I value those memories and the people who were a part of them. And I'm especially proud that, by taking my sport seriously, I was able to pay a debt to the authentic legends of pro wrestling who gave me their friendship and shared with me their knowledge and deep respect for our art.

I genuinely believe, in my heart, that I was born lucky, or, at least, in the right place at the right time. I was a major player in pro wrestling for many years and one of the few performers who survived what were enormous odds and ended up with success. It could have very easily gone sour for me, as I saw it go sour for a lot of people. Hell, just surviving the road was something of which I could be proud. For the majority of my active career, which extended from the mid-1930s into the late 1970s, there was no Interstate highway system to ease the chore of driving from town to town, and the airlines, in terms of equipment and connections, were nothing

like what they are today. I once calculated that, during my career, I wrestled a minimum of 6,000 matches and half again as many competitive workouts, drove at least 2.5 million miles in all kinds of weather on all kinds of roads, and flew another 14 million miles. I believe luck had something to do with my surviving all that.

In 1938, when I was just a kid in the business, I was working for the St. Louis promotion. The office had done its typically insensitive job, booking me in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on a Thursday night and in Houston, Texas, on the following night. That's a distance of a little more than 800 miles, and I knew the only way I'd make it to Houston in time was to catch a flight. There was no thought of scratching. You simply didn't miss a booking.

There was no airport in Chattanooga, so I called Atlanta, but nothing was flying that night because of severe weather. I was sure I could make connections out of New Orleans, though, so I

talked another wrestler into driving me there. Immediately after the matches in Chattanooga, we jumped in the guy's car and drove all night, through heavy rain and at dangerous speeds over hump-backed roads. We arrived in New Orleans just in time to see my flight taking off.

I was tired, irritable, and frustrated, and, like a jerk, I even bitched to my companion that he should have driven faster. Someone at the airline said they had another flight to Houston in the afternoon that might get me to my booking on time, so I bought a ticket and then got us a couple of hotel rooms where we could get some sleep. Well, I caught my afternoon flight and arrived in Houston with barely enough time to pull on my tights and run into the ring. What occupied my mind that night, though, and for a long time afterwards, was what I had been told at the airline counter when I arrived for my afternoon flight: The earlier flight I had missed had crashed into Lake Pontchartrain minutes after takeoff, killing everyone on board.

I'm not a religious man, but if there is such a thing as a guardian angel, one was sitting on my shoulder that day, and when I reflected back on that incident years later, the thought occurred to me that maybe one has looked after me all along. To have survived all those years while driving and flying millions of miles, skipping meals, never getting enough rest, suffering constant aches and pains, and having to contend with thieves, gangsters and even murderers, one had to very damned lucky to make it, much less enjoy success.

Endnotes, Chapter 1

Chapter 2

I became a wrestling fan in 1924 when I was eight years old. That was the year my father, who had been a Greco-Roman wrestler in his native Hungary, decided it was time to introduce me to the sport he loved. It also was the year I saw my

first professional wrestling match, at the Coliseum in my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri.

It wasn't easy to ignore wrestling in St. Louis. The city was one of the centers of the wrestling culture in the United States during those years, in large part because the city had a large base of European immigrants who had brought their enthusiasm for the sport with them to this country. The southern part of the city, where I was raised, was composed of solidly ethnic neighborhoods — Germans, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Greeks, Scandinavians — and each had plenty of amateur clubs where they taught the sport to children and staged competitions with each other as entertainment. The public schools had an intramural wrestling program, as well, and the local newspapers wrote about it regularly.

This enthusiasm for wrestling carried over into the pro scene, too, which was run by a Greek immigrant named Tom Pakiotis. He had staged his first card in 1922 as a special event inside a

theater, and the response was so good that he started running regular cards. By the time I attended my first match, Pakiotis — he had changed his last name by then to Packs — had established St. Louis as one of the top wrestling towns in North America, a claim that held true for most of the 20th century.

My parents, Martin and Katherine, met at an ethnic social in St. Louis in 1910 and were married after a brief courtship.[4] In 1915, they moved with their two daughters, ages three and one, to Banat, Michigan, a small village about 30 miles from Menominee, where a group of immigrant Austrian-Hungarian peasants were trying to make a new life for themselves as farmers. That was where I was born on April 24, 1916, in a log cabin, believe it or not. My parents named me Aloysius Martin Thesz.[5]

Farm life proved to be too hard for most of the immigrant families in Banat and the community soon collapsed. I don't believe you can even find

it today on a map. By the time I was two years old, our family — which now included a third daughter — was back in St. Louis. Pop had been a shoemaker in Hungary, and that's the trade he returned to, buying a two-story house on Virginia Avenue in a Polish-German neighborhood and opening a shoe-repair shop on the ground floor.

Nobody, least of all me, would have predicted in my childhood that I would become a professional athlete. For one thing, I developed rather late and was one of the smaller kids in the neighborhood well into my teens. I played some baseball and soccer, but I didn't display any particular gift for either one. At my very best, I was only average, and I knew it, too, because I played against some kids who could do things I only dreamed of doing.

I also was a very shy kid, in large part because I was a confused semi-foreigner. It began with my mother's father, Hans Shultz, who lived with us after we returned from Michigan. He was very much an Old-World man, a German potter from

Vienna, Austria, and he was the boss of the house. He insisted my sisters and I speak nothing but German at home, and that's exactly what we did. (This had a practical side to it. My parents could also speak English and Hungarian, so insisting that their kids speak only German was a good way for us to keep secrets from them.) We also had to attend German school on Saturdays, and there was no argument about that, either. The upshot of all this was that my sisters and I had a very rough time of it when we began attending public school. In my case, when I entered kindergarten at age five, I couldn't speak any English at all.

School was hard enough on me with the language barrier to contend with, but the teachers complicated things even further when they discovered I was left-handed. Maybe they're tolerant of that these days, but they weren't back then. The teachers insisted I learn to write with my right hand, and that only confused me more. I had the poorest penmanship in my class, and that didn't

help my battered self-esteem at all.

It only got worse. Trying to switch to writing with my right hand was so traumatic I developed a bad lisp. I had to attend special speech classes until it was corrected. What with elementary school, German classes on Saturday, and what I called "lisping school" classes, I was practically a seven-days-a-week student. I also had a very poor self-image. It's still a wonder to me that I survived it.

Wrestling was literally my salvation, and I have my father to thank for it. He had a lot of Old World attitudes himself, and one of them was the conviction that a son must follow in his father's footsteps. So, when I turned eight, he had me begin helping in the shoe-repair shop after school. He also allowed me to quit the German school because he needed me on Saturdays. My introduction to wrestling occurred at the same time, and I remembered thinking I was somehow being rewarded for all my suffering. Years later,

though, I learned that everyone in the family was seriously concerned that I had become a "sissy." I was shy, I had no friends to speak of, and my only real playmates were my sisters. Maybe that's what Pop really had in mind when he decided to introduce me to Greco-Roman wrestling.

Since it's considered the classic style, with no holds allowed below the waist, Greco-Roman is known as "wrestling for long-hairs." It's a beautiful style for someone who is educated to it, but it has never attained the popularity in this country that freestyle enjoys. Pop didn't care. He loved the style and wanted me to appreciate it, too. He started me out with the exercises that are the traditional starting point for Greco-Roman — backbends, bridges, and pushups — and I did them religiously every night, strengthening my body for the wrestling I would eventually learn. It's like building a house. You begin with the foundation — in this case, the exercises — and work upwards. In the Greco-Roman schools, a boy does the exercises for a couple of years before ever

learning a single move, a practice designed to minimize injury when he does begin wrestling. However, since I was such a devoted and hungry student, my father decided to introduce me to some of the basic moves during my first year. We would practice at night on the kitchen floor behind the shoe-repair shop, and I couldn't get enough of it.

I loved the wrestling from the very beginning for a variety of reasons. For one thing, I discovered immediately that I had an almost natural feel for it, something I couldn't say about my efforts in other sports. Also, wrestling, like boxing, is a sport where competition occurs within weight classes, which means even the smallest kid has a chance to excel and become a champion, and that certainly appealed to me.

I also discovered I had lightning-quick reflexes, a God-given gift for a wrestler if there ever was one. Power and muscle mass are fine, but they're not enough to guarantee success over the long

haul. The well-rounded wrestler is one who has strength, stamina, and quick reactions, and the latter quality is the only one of the three you can't develop. Either you have it or you don't — and I did, in spades.

Finally, I discovered something essential about myself: that an individual sport like wrestling was more suited to my character than a team sport. I liked the challenge of one-on-one competition, with no equipment except my own skills, knowing the outcome was entirely up to me, and it somehow made victory all the sweeter.

It was the professional matches at the Coliseum, though, that really caught my attention. They had an aura of excitement to them that made them, for me, better than the circus, and I know that a large part of it was seeing some of the great wrestlers perform in person. Names like Ed Lewis, Joe Stecher and Stanislaus Zbyszko were every bit as familiar to and admired by the public of that era as Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth, and all of

wrestling's top stars were appearing regularly in St. Louis at the time. Pop and I became regulars, riding the streetcar downtown for the matches and sitting high above the arena's floor in the "nose-bleed" section.

(By the time I was a teenager and wrestling professionally myself, I had learned one of the ironic truths about the business: The heroic good guy in the ring was often a jerk, while the villain was a great guy. It's not a hard-and-fast rule, you understand, but it's nevertheless true that many of wrestling's "bad" guys were terrific people, while many of the hero types were arrogant asses who often bought their own good press and, in severe cases, "believed their own shit.")

Pop and I also became semi-regulars at the public workouts every Sunday, where the local newspaper reporters and fans had a chance to watch the pros scrimmage with each other. The workouts were held at the National Gym, a well-known downtown spot which later became

legendary within the wrestling business as the Business Men's Gym. The place had bleacher seats where, for 50-cents admission, you could sit and watch all the wrestlers on the upcoming card go through actual workouts. Reporters from the three local daily newspapers covered the workouts religiously, and they treated them seriously, too, because they believed what they were seeing was the real thing, which it was. Performing a match was something done only in the arenas. The workouts were exactly what the name implied, and the wrestlers didn't fool around. A performer who couldn't actually wrestle would stay away — or be ordered by the promoter to stay away — for fear of exposing his ineptitude in front of the news media and fans.

It's funny how things shape our lives and put us on the path to what we become. At an early age, I adopted a ten-word adage that I had seen on the wall of an athletic training room: If it is to be, it is up to me. When I was 12 years old, I became driven to succeed as a wrestler, and it was a

neighborhood kid who was largely responsible. I've never forgotten the incident in which it was spawned.

Wilbert Meyer lived across the alley from me. We had become inseparable friends. We were Will and Louie, always together: mornings, afternoons, at school, on weekends. If I wasn't helping my father in the shop, I could be found in Will's company. (On one of our Tom Sawyer/Huckleberry Finn adventures to the Mississippi River, Will actually saved my life. It was spring and the river was still cold, but there was a slough about 50 yards across and very inviting to a couple of kids. We were on our way back when, about 20 yards from shore, the cold became too much for me and I literally couldn't move. I called to Will, who was already on shore, and he plunged back in and pulled me to shore. I suppose it sounds dramatic, but at the time, it was really no big deal.)

On one particular day, Will and I climbed the

large sycamore tree in my backyard. As we perched there, he began telling me about a recent duck-hunting trip he made with his father. Will claimed to have shot a duck on the fly, but I was skeptical. Hitting a duck in flight is not an easy task, even for an adult, and I said so. In other words, I was calling Will a liar. I obviously hit the mark, too, because Will flew into a rage and began hitting me. He pounded me so hard that we both fell out of the tree, hitting the ground hard, but Will climbed on top of me and proceeded to punch me silly for another couple of minutes. He was a year older than me and quite a bit larger, and I was still a gangly, awkward kid, so it wasn't much of a match.

Will put a lot of lumps and bruises on me that day, but they didn't hurt anywhere near as much as the fact that my best friend had suddenly turned on me, like I was his enemy. It literally broke my heart, and it still hurts today, more than 60 years later, because that's when my innocence died. Until that incident, I had thought of the world

as a warm, friendly place; I thought everyone loved me, and that everything in life would go smoothly. I was so traumatized by that episode that I couldn't eat a bite for a couple of days. My parents and sisters were worried that I was seriously injured and trying to hide it from them because I wouldn't tell anyone what had happened. I simply couldn't put my feelings into words.

That beating was the real turning point of my life. I thought about it for a long time before consciously deciding I would never again put my blind trust in anyone or anything. I became even more of a loner and pretty much stopped playing with the other kids after school. I gave my full attention to my Greco-Roman exercises and my work at the shoe-repair shop.

I gave my full attention to my Greco-Roman exercises and my work at the shoe-repair shop.

At age 14, after completing the eighth grade, I

dropped out of school and became, in effect, an adult, and began working full-time in my father's shop. I hated school, of course, because of the problems I'd had early on, and I was thrilled when Pop said I could quit. He was himself an Old World-sort of guy and didn't believe in education, so he viewed it as perfectly natural for me to begin making a living at an early age. If it hadn't been for my mother, whose family had more respect for education, my sisters and I might not have spent a single day in public school.

I was seriously hooked on wrestling by that time, which pleased my father, and he rewarded me by arranging for me to learn how to wrestle freestyle, which was, and is, the dominant amateur style in the United States. Pop had gotten to know the coaches at Cleveland High School, which was only two blocks away from our home, because they always brought the football team's shoes to his shop before each season for reconditioning. It was a simple matter for him to persuade them to allow me to work out in the evenings, four nights a week,

with the school wrestling team.

Greco-Roman is an altogether different style of wrestling, but the essentials and the desired results are the same as freestyle. I had advanced enough with it on my own that picking up freestyle wasn't all that much of a chore. In fact, being adept in Greco-Roman was actually an advantage, because it gave me weapons that weren't in a freestyle wrestler's arsenal. I was in top condition, too, thanks to doing my exercises religiously for six years. In practically no time at all, the coaches were allowing me to wrestle in the city-wide intramurals, in the 160-pound class.

One night, as I was getting manhandled by a kid who was several years older than me and fairly advanced in wrestling, I caught the eye of an old pro wrestler named John Zastrow, who was watching the workouts from the bleachers. I don't know what he saw in me because I got a thorough shellacking that night, but when he introduced himself after the workouts and offered to train me,

I accepted his offer. I had no way of knowing it, of course, but a door was opening for me. Zastrow was the first of several people who would take an interest in my wrestling and extend a helping hand.

Zastrow was a tough old devil. He may have been 65 years old at the time, but he was still in good condition, and there weren't many amateurs around the city who could handle him when it came to a workout. He became my regular workout partner and he helped elevate my wrestling to such a plane that, before long, I was close to dominating my weight class in the city-wide intramurals, often against older and more experienced wrestlers. One night, not long after I turned 16, Zastrow told me I was ready for a higher level of competition.

I couldn't believe it when, the next day, he delivered me to the door of the Business Men's Gym, where the pros worked out, and introduced me to another old-timer, a man named Joe Sanderson. Since I had been a fan of the pros for

several years by then, I recognized him immediately. He had been a very good junior-heavyweight — the 180- to 200-pound class — in his younger days and had been working for the previous several years as a referee and salaried workout wrestler for promoter Tom Packs. Zastrow told him that I was a decent amateur who was hungry to learn more, so Sanderson agreed to take me under his wing and see what I could do. We had several workouts over a period of weeks and he obviously was sufficiently impressed — I was a solid 175 pounds and already stood six feet tall — because one night he suggested, almost off-handedly, that I might want to give pro wrestling a try. It was literally that simple.

I was only a kid, but I had absolutely no illusions by then about the reality of pro wrestling. Figuring out most of the matches weren't legitimate contests was simply a matter of paying attention to what the performers did in the ring. I had been attending the pro cards for eight years, and as I gained

experience as an amateur, I began to realize that what happened in most pro matches was simply impossible … unless the wrestlers were cooperating. I didn't know the name for it, but it was obvious to me at an early age that they were performing their matches. Anyone who had amateur experience could see it. In fact, another amateur and I had once worked an intramural match just for fun, using legitimate holds throughout, but cooperating all the way, and the audience — including the coaches — was none the wiser.

It didn't matter to me that pro wrestling was a performance, and not a competitive event. I had come to look upon the matches as entertainment, not sport, and I enjoyed them for what they were. A lot of other regular fans had the same attitude, so it wasn't like someone was swindling us out of our money. Besides, I had been around the Business Men's Gym long enough by then — at the Sunday public workouts and, later, in training with Joe Sanderson — to understand that many of

the pros were the authentic item, and I was awed just to be in their company.

Sanderson's invitation intrigued me. I had progressed far enough as an amateur to have developed confidence in my abilities, and I had begun to wonder just how good a wrestler I could become. Since I obviously wasn't headed to college, the only way for me to satisfy my curiosity was to give pro wrestling a try, so I accepted Sanderson's offer. Frankly, it looked to me like the pros had a lifestyle that was much more attractive than a shoemaker's, so I figured it was worth a shot.

My debut as a pro wrestler came a few weeks later, across the Mississippi in East St. Louis, Illinois. In the interim, Sanderson arranged several private lessons with another old pro who taught me the bare rudiments of performing a match — how to fall without hurting myself, how to "register" an opponent's moves and holds, how to subtly exaggerate a move or hold so the fans in the

cheap seats at the back of the house could see it. The only way to become an effective performer, however, is to get out of the gymnasium and in front of an audience, the sooner the better, and try it. Believe me, an audience understands what it's seeing, and it will let you know in a multitude of ways if your work isn't exciting or convincing. I was greener than spring grass, but I was anxious to give it a try when the call finally came from Joe Sanderson. "Kid," he said, "you're working the curtain-raiser in East St. Louis next Tuesday."

The booking was with a Baptist minister, the Rev. R.M. Gunn, who ran regular cards in his East St. Louis church using junior heavyweights, and he did very well with them, too. His approach was simple: He would print up tickets and distribute them to the local boys who would be appearing on the card. We'd sell them around our neighborhoods, to friends and family, and then give the receipts back to Gunn, who would pay us a percentage ... a very small percentage. If we sold,

say, $50 worth of tickets, he might give us three or four bucks.

Sanderson did me an enormous favor that night after my match — I lost, by the way — when he told the Rev. Gunn he wasn't going to allow anyone to pull any stunts with me. He was telling Gunn and the other wrestlers in the dressing room — and me, because it caught me by surprise — that I was protected, a break that was denied a lot of people in the wrestling business, especially the young ones.[6] I hadn't been looking for any favors, but Sanderson couldn't have done me a bigger one. Why it happened is something I honestly cannot answer, although I've long suspected that the St. Louis wrestling office had decided, thanks to some lobbying by John Zastrow and Sanderson, that if I wasn't rushed or used badly, I had some potential for developing into a hometown star. An authentic hometown hero, someone with genuine roots in his community, was almost always good box-office for a wrestling promotion, and they were relatively rare, too. When promoters

stumbled across one, they usually went out of their way to throw a blanket over him.

Whatever the reason, Sanderson and some people who came along later, including some big stars in the business, decided to help me by seeing to it I wasn't overmatched or forced to eat canvas just to satisfy some promoter's ego. "Don't mess with the Hunky," they'd tell promoters, with the result being very few people tried to play games with me while I was learning my craft.

That first year as a pro wrestler was a blur of activity. I was still working in my father's shop and working out — with the pros by then — during every spare moment. The St. Louis wrestling office, which had a business relationship with the gym, arranged bookings for me a couple of nights a week, on small shows in high school gyms around St. Louis and in nearby towns like Hannibal, St. Joseph, and Moberly, as well as several small communities in Indiana and Illinois. It certainly wasn't the big time. We called it the "semi-pro"

circuit, primarily because we never got more than five dollars a show, and we usually had nothing left after we paid our expenses, but it was a foot in the door of professional wrestling. It was incredibly valuable experience, especially in terms of learning how to handle our money.

Actually, the St. Louis shows were no problem at all, and the ones in nearby towns could be handled fairly economically. I had bought an old Model A Ford for $45, and it was good enough for the short road trips or for running around town. If the show was any distance away, I'd take a train or ride with two or three other wrestlers in one of their cars. Gas was only 15 cents a gallon in those days, and when we car-pooled, we'd share the cost by paying the driver a penny a mile. If we got hungry on the way — and it seems like we always did — we'd have what we called "baloney blowouts," where we'd pool our change to buy a loaf of bread and some bologna for sandwiches.

It was during this period that another young

wrestler, Warren Bockwinkel, took me up to the St. Louis wrestling office for my first meeting with the promoter. Tom Packs had watched my progress on the "semi-pro" circuit and had heard good reports about how I was becoming an attraction — I often wrestled the semi-main and main events in the small towns — so he decided to invest a little more heavily in me. "I want you to start training regularly with George Tragos," he said to me.

George Tragos was the man who was to become the first great influence on my development as a professional wrestler. John Zastrow and Joe Sanderson had opened the door and started me on my way, but neither of them was in George Tragos' class. Very few people were.[7]

Tragos was never a great success in the pro ranks because he was a middleweight. There never was much demand for middleweights, and even if there had been, it wouldn't have made much difference because Tragos was a hooker, not

a performer, with very little in-the-ring color or personality. He was a legend inside the industry, though, where he was recognized as one of the most knowledgeable hookers in the world.

Tragos also was one of the strangest men I ever met, and that's saying something, because the wrestling business was full of strange and colorful characters. For one thing, he never smiled. He was my personal trainer for two years and we became pretty close, but I'm not sure I ever saw him crack so much as a grin. To Tragos, life was a deadly serious subject, and there was nothing to laugh about. Around the gym, the boys called him "Icewater" … but only behind his back, of course.

Some of those who unwisely challenged him viewed him as one mean, brutal sonofabitch who enjoyed hurting people. Why he never hurt me is something they never understood. For years, I ran across other pros who couldn't believe I had worked out regularly with the man and escaped serious injury. A lot of people warned me that

Tragos would one day lose his head and seriously cripple me, as he had other wrestlers, but it never happened. I always showed him the tremendous respect he deserved, both as a wrestler and as a man.

His reputation inside the business for hooking was such that I saw more than a few visiting heavyweights come into the gym for a workout and turn right around, headed for the door at a fast clip, after they spotted George Tragos. I could understand why because I saw him deliberately hurt some smart-mouthed guys during workouts. When I'd ask him why he did it, he would just shrug and say, "They have no respect for our sport."

The vast majority of his victims, though, were civilians. A lot of them were people who showed up at the St. Louis wrestling office and announced they wanted to become "rasslers." Bill Nelson, an old carnival wrestler who worked as Tom Packs' booker, had standing orders to send such people to

the Business Men's Gym for a workout with Tragos, and that's what he would do. Ostensibly, the reason for the workout was to see if the guy had any ability or potential. The real reason, of course, was simply to run the guy off, and getting stretched by George Tragos was an effective way to do it. The ones he most enjoyed hurting were the ones who thought they were pretty tough and that wrestlers were fakes. Some of them would show up at the gym on their own — more of them than you might imagine, too — and challenge one of the pros to a contest. Invariably, they would end up on the mat with Tragos, who would break an arm or a leg and send them on their way. In time, people both inside and outside the business began to refer to the gym as "Tragos' Torture Chamber."

Tragos always started my lessons with me on the bottom, which is where you don't want to be. One day, I finally summoned up enough courage to ask him why I couldn't be the one on top for once, or why we couldn't start even. Tragos exploded. "I am coach!" he yelled in his thick Greek

accent. "Any fool can start on top. If you start on the bottom, you learn to wrestle!" I never complained to him again ... and I never got to start on top, either. He was absolutely right, though. I learned.

One thing I didn't learn, however, was to hurt an opponent when I had him at a disadvantage, and it used to infuriate Tragos. "You're never going to be a great wrestler if you don't make up your mind to hurt these people when you have a chance," he said one day. "When you get an opportunity to hurt your opponent, hurt him!" And he meant it.

I remember one out-of-town card we made together where Tragos was booked with a young hotshot from Evansville, Indiana, who had been in the business only a short time. The kid, whose name was Buster something-or-other, had a lot of newspaper publicity behind him because he had been a very good amateur and the local promoter was very high on him. The promoter, who hoped to make some big money with the kid, was building

him into a star by having him win all his matches in impressive fashion and in very short times — what we called "squashes." That's what the promoter had in mind that night, but he obviously didn't know anything about Tragos, who had been blackballed from more than one promotion because he would often refuse to lose to an inferior opponent.

True to form, Tragos refused to lose that night. Business was business, even with George, but he wasn't about to lay down for some green rookie. The promoter got very angry and lost his head. He stuck his finger in Tragos' face and shouted at him, "This kid can actually wrestle, you stupid asshole, so why don't you just go out there and try your best, okay?"

It was a very stupid thing to say, but the promoter was like a lot of promoters in that he actually knew little or nothing about real wrestling. Tragos wasn't afraid to compete with anyone, with good reason, and he jumped at the chance. When he and

this young Adonis went on, the rest of us emptied out of the dressing room and crowded into the back rows to watch what some of us knew was going to be an execution. Sure enough, only a couple of minutes into the match, Tragos hooked one of the kid's arms with a double wristlock, a deadly hold if used properly, and he jammed it home. It tore the ligaments, tendons, and muscles in one motion, and I'm sure the ambulance had no trouble finding the arena because the kid was screaming at the top of his lungs and could probably be heard blocks away. They rushed him to the local hospital and put him in a bed. A couple of days later, an internal infection set in, which quickly developed into gangrene. A week later, the surgeons amputated the kid's arm. Tragos considered the kid's loss all part of the sport.

Another occasion I remember vividly involved Tragos and a referee named Fred Voepel who had a bad habit of snatching the wrestlers during their matches. It was a very dangerous action for the boys because it could cause them to screw up their

timing and cause someone to get hurt. When the fool grabbed George one night during a match, George told him in no uncertain terms to never do it again. One word led to another and George ended it by inviting the ref down to the gym to settle the issue on the mat. Imagine our amazement when Voepel actually showed up. A bunch of us were watching from the bleachers as they went at it, and we knew it was only a matter of time before Tragos hooked the guy and hurt him.

Sure enough, Tragos nailed the guy to the rack within a couple of minutes with what's known as a top scissor with a cross-face, an excruciating hold for the guy who's on the bottom, and we could hear clearly as one by one, like dominoes falling, Tragos dislocated Voepel's vertebrae. That's the kind of damage a hooker could do to an opponent. The ref was carried off the mat, partially paralyzed, and he spent about three weeks in the hospital recovering. Tragos just shrugged it off.

Tragos never got over the fact that I couldn't bring myself to intentionally hurt an opponent, but for some reason, it didn't stop him from sharing his knowledge of hooks with me. Maybe it was because he could see I was truly serious about my wrestling and dedicated to becoming the best I could be. Whatever the explanation, I'm deeply grateful to him. For one thing, he taught me the double wristlock, which I guarantee you saved my bacon more than a handful of times over the years. He also polished my wrestling, working with me in the gym and arranging workouts with good opponents wherever he could find them. I couldn't handle any of the top shooters at the gym, but there were plenty of decent journeymen around, and there was an abundance of talent at the colleges and universities in the region. Since Tragos knew most of the coaches from his days as an adviser to the wrestling team at the University of Missouri, all it took to set up something was a phone call.

I improved fast during my first two years with

George Tragos, but he never let me get a big head about it, which was sensible. In fact, it may have been the most important lesson he taught me. He lived with the attitude that you couldn't get too high on yourself because there was always someone just a little bit better waiting down the road, and he tried to instill that in me. If he could see I was feeling full of myself after a particularly good session with an opponent, he would say something to take the wind out of my sails. Something like, "He's not in your class. You should have beaten him in thirty seconds."

A compliment from George Tragos would have been little more than icing on my cake, though, because I couldn't have been much happier with the way my life was unfolding. My wrestling was coming along nicely, I was beginning to get the hang of performing a match, and some of the promoters on the "semi-pro" circuit had actually begun to ask for me. I was completely absorbed in learning my craft, especially the wrestling. There were times when I would literally wake up in the

middle of the night, thinking about a hold or a move I'd goofed up during the previous day's workout, and I'd lie there, staring at the ceiling while I thought about how to avoid the same mistake in the future.

I also was spreading my wings, seeing a little bit of what life had to offer, and it looked very sweet, indeed. I owe a large debt in that area to one of the great wrestlers of that era, Ray Steele, a very popular card around the country who would become the recognized world heavyweight champion in 1940. A Nebraska native whose real name was Pete Sauer, he was a handsome, easy-going guy who'd learned his wrestling in the carnivals. He loved women and fun, in that particular order. He got into the habit of inviting me along after our workouts. We usually would go to a famous restaurant, the Grecian Gardens, for dinner, and then we'd make the rounds of the after-hours burlesque houses and theaters. I was a naive and sheltered kid, and Ray got a big laugh out of my efforts to affect a cool style with the

women. He was never cruel about it, though, and he became like an older brother to me.[8]

I should have suspected that maybe things were going too well, that I was headed for a dispute with my parents over my wrestling, but sadly, I didn't have a clue. Actually, my mother had become seriously disenchanted with it during my early amateur days when I was 15 and began to develop a cauliflower ear, the left one. She insisted I stop wrestling, but I refused, and for awhile, I honestly thought she was going to leave my father over it because he took my side and defended me. A cauliflower ear happens when you catch a lot of blows on your ear while wrestling, or when it gets pinched while caught in a head scissors or headlock. The blood vessels and cartilage rupture and the ear swells from the hemorrhaging. If you don't have the ear drained — and I had mine drained many times before I gave up — the blood eventually dries and calcifies, leaving the ear misshapen and as hard as a rock. Since it changes the shape of your ear, it

also affects your hearing. The only way to avoid one is to quit wrestling, and I couldn't do that. I lived for the sport. My self-esteem was directly tied to it. Besides, a cauliflower ear was the badge of a truly competitive wrestler, so I didn't mind ... although I couldn't sleep on my left side for six months when I decided to let mine go because the pain was so bad.

Eventually, my mother stopped complaining, and my father remained supportive well into my "semi-pro" days. I thought everything was fine, so I was stunned by his reaction when I came home one day early in the summer of 1935 and announced with pride the big news: The St. Louis wrestling office was loaning me out to a regular pro wrestling circuit. I was anxious to give it a try, but my father absolutely refused to hear of it. His attitude was still very European. He believed a son should never try to rise above his father's station, which is what I would be doing in his eyes if I became a pro wrestler. He said he had trained me to become a shoemaker, and that's exactly what he expected

me to do. "Forget about pro wrestling," he said.

He should have let it go at that, but he didn't. I had been raised to be a respectful and obedient son, and I probably would have complied if he hadn't told me I'd never make it as a pro wrestler. It simply wasn't in my nature, he said, to withstand the training and abuse that was necessary in order to succeed as a pro in those days.

I was offended and angry. "Obviously," I replied, "you don't know your own son." One angry exchange led to another, until we reached that point where neither of us could back down. I finally said I was leaving to try my hand at pro wrestling, and that was the end of the argument.

It was sad it came to that, but I simply had to give the business a try. I had been preparing myself for a long time, and if there was ever another 19-year-old kid who was better prepared for the pro wrestling grind than me, I never met him. Physically, I was like a sleek greyhound —

6-foot-2, 205 solid pounds of muscle, with a 20-inch neck. By then, I was working out every day at the Business Men's Gym, from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon, with people like George Tragos and Ray Steele, and I was beginning to see a glimmer of what I could achieve.[9]

I also was well-prepared emotionally. I had been raised in a strict, conservative German-Hungarian Catholic home, so things like thrift, hard work, and self-reliance had been instilled in me early. By the time I was ready to hit the road I had close to $2,000 in a savings account, money I had earned working for my father and by scrimping on my semi-pro payoffs. My upbringing and experiences also had taught me to keep my mouth shut and my eyes open. I had already seen enough in the dressing rooms and gyms to know pro wrestling was a tough business where I would have to watch my step very carefully.

I was very focused on my goals and I was determined I wasn't going to make the mistakes I

had seen a lot of wrestlers make, like drinking, not working out regularly, and being content to live day to day with only five dollars in their pockets and a whore in their bed. I had already learned how to smell double-talk from a promoter or another wrestler, and I knew the importance of keeping a confidence. I had seen that people like Ray Steele, George Tragos, and other authentic wrestlers commanded respect in the business, and that's what I wanted for myself.

Finally, and this was probably the most important thing, I understood that perseverance and talent didn't always pay off, that there were absolutely no guarantees in life. I was only a kid, but by then I had already seen several people who had given wrestling everything they had to give, and had still gotten nothing in return. I had seen wrestlers who were given a tremendous push by a promoter, but they had flopped where it counted: with the fans who paid their money at the box-office window.

Ray Steele was the one who explained to me the bottom line in words I've never forgotten. "Kid," he told me one night over dinner, "you may have the aptitude to become a great wrestler, but if you don't learn to make money at it ... well, then it's only a hobby."

If a wrestler had ability, help from the front office, a good physique, and the proper attitude, he had a shot at success, but that's all it was … just a shot. You had to pay attention to your craft and be ready when your moment came, if it ever did, and when I hit the road that summer of 1935, I was determined to do it.

Besides, I couldn't go back home and admit defeat.

Endnotes, Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Like every other aspect of American life in the summer of 1935, professional wrestling was suffering through the Depression, so the Iowa territory, run by promoter Pinkie George, was about as good a place as any for a rookie to begin. Better than most, in fact.

I say that, first of all, because Iowa is one of the tradition-rich wrestling states of the Midwest. Home to some of the authentic greats, both amateurs and pros, Iowa had a broad base of fan support that was well-educated in the sport. Those farmers, many of them immigrants, knew their wrestling.

It also was a compact little territory — towns like Waterloo, Cedar Rapids, Ames. The farthest stretch was Omaha, Nebraska, 130 miles due west from the booking office in Des Moines, so our expenses — which came out of our own pockets — were not as bad as they were in some of the more spread-out territories.

That's not to say it was easy, though, because it wasn't. My first pro match was in Fort Dodge, 90 miles from Des Moines, and Pinkie George paid me five dollars. Hell, the trip alone cost me eight dollars, so I was in the hole right from the start. That's the way things were, though, and I would meet a lot of guys who, even with part-time jobs, still dropped out of the business because they couldn't make ends meet. If I hadn't had that savings account back in St. Louis, I probably would have been starved out, too.

If you were careful and you caught a break or two, you could scratch by. In my case, I was a frugal kid and learned to live on three dollars a day, excluding what I had to pay for transportation, and that wasn't all that bad. Gas was still about 15 cents a gallon, and it was fairly cheap to take the bus or train. Hotels were cheap, something like a dollar a day — two dollars a night was a luxurious place — or you could stay during road trips at what were called tourist homes, where a family would rent you a bedroom for a dollar a night and

they'd throw in breakfast for another 50 cents. The tourist homes were actually nicer than most of the hotels, certainly cleaner, and later, when I was making better money, I would still stay in some of them because I had become friends with the families.

Eating regularly was the biggest problem, and all of us, even the boys on top, skipped more than a few meals. A decent meal might cost as little as 50 cents, but that was a lot of money when you didn't have much in your pocket. It was tough to get ahead financially because we only worked two or three times a week in those days, and a typical payoff was only $15. If we got a $25 payoff, we could actually save a little, and a $40 or $50 payoff — which we might have seen only a couple of times a year — was like winning the lottery. The wrestlers learned to ferret out cheap eating places, and sharing each other's discoveries was the hot topic of conversation in the dressing rooms.

Sometimes, you simply had no choice but to do without, and we could get pretty desperate when we were hungry. One night, I was riding back from a booking in Omaha with another wrestler, Lou Plummer. Neither of us had eaten for 12 hours and we were so hungry that we stopped alongside a cornfield, climbed the fence, and "requisitioned" several ears of corn for ourselves. It turned out to be fodder corn, the type grown exclusively for the farm animals, but we didn't care, because we were little better than animals ourselves. When we got back to Des Moines, we went straight to Lou's room, cooked the corn on a hot plate, and ate every single ear. Stealing corn became a popular stunt with the other wrestlers, and we learned to plan ahead and pool our pennies to buy a stick of butter for those occasions.

It really wasn't as bad a life as it might sound. The Depression had dragged on for so long by then that people had adjusted. There was no point in crying about how tough things were. It wouldn't accomplish anything. You just had to get

out there and do the best you could. Everyone, not just pro wrestlers, was having a hard time making a buck. I knew skilled craftsmen — carpenters, bricklayers, people like that — who were happy to make $15 a week, and some of them had families to care for, so who was I to complain about my situation? Frankly, I was pretty happy with my life.

For one thing, I was never bored. I loved the idea that I was a pro wrestler, even if I was only a preliminary boy, and I couldn't wait to wake up each morning and begin spending time with the veterans, soaking up their stories and advice. I had plenty of other things to occupy my mind, too, even when I was on the road by myself. I had decided during my "semi-pro" days that I'd try to educate myself as best I could. I adopted the habit of spending my free time at the public library, reading and trying to pick up those supjects I'd missed by dropping out of school. I simply continued to do that while traveling the Iowa territory, and I still do it today.

Omaha was always a special treat, if you could get booked there. The city's big wrestling star was Ernie Dusek, a nice man and a good wrestler who I had met earlier in St. Louis, and I liked visiting him very much, especially when he would tell his wrestling stories. He was one of four brothers named Hason — they borrowed the Dusek name from a neighbor when they broke into wrestling — who were very successful in the business during the 1920s and into the late 1950s. They billed themselves as the "Riot Squad" and the "Dirty Duseks," and believe me when I say they lived up to the name. They were so popular — or notorious, if you prefer the term — that Time magazine did a big profile on them in 1935. If you worked Omaha, you could usually count on Ernie having you out to his house after the matches for a beer, a wild-game dinner, and some conversation, so getting a booking there was something to look forward to.

(I liked Omaha for another reason as well: the steaks. Forget what you hear about Kansas City or

Kobe beef. Omaha was, and remains today, the place to get the best steaks in the world. Sure, money was extremely tight then, but if you happened to be in Omaha with an extra buck in your pocket, it was well-spent if you treated yourself to a steak.)

Des Moines was a nice town, too, headquarters for the territory, and that's where we spent our time when we weren't traveling. Our social life there was simple. Either we were hanging out together at the Randolph Hotel, where Pinkie George had his office, or we were working out at the YMCA. My preference, of course, was working out, because it meant real wrestling, and although Des Moines certainly wasn't St. Louis in terms of having a lot of top competitors around, there were always at least a couple who could give you a real test. One of them during my stint there was Ambrose Rascher, who had been a top amateur at Indiana University, where he was trained by Billy Thom, the coach of the 1936 U.S. Olympic wrestling team. Another was Sol Slagel,

a Kraut from Kansas who had been around the business for quite a while by then.

Slagel was one of the first in a long line of colorful characters that I was to meet in the wrestling business. He was a fat, roly-poly sort of performer, a double-jointed contortionist who had a lot of unusual moves. He had been a big draw in New York, working for one of the strangest characters in the business, Jack Pfefer, who more than anyone else was responsible for building up wrestling's large ethnic audiences. If Pfefer had a guy he thought might appeal to, say, the Polish community, he would change the guy's name to something Polish and create a phony history for him. That's what he did with Sol Slagel. He decided Slagel looked like a Jew, so that's how he billed him, and New York's large Jewish community bought it in a big way.

Slagel was a very nice guy, fun to be around, and he taught me lot of his escapes and moves. But he also had some glaring faults, like his

kleptomania. It was an authentic illness, something he couldn't control, and I'd never seen anything like it. In Des Moines, he was making it with a very pretty girl who was the sister-in-law of the guy who owned the hotel where Slagel was staying. Sol would boost things like expensive perfume from the hotel pharmacy, also owned by the girl's brother-in-law, and give them to the unsuspecting girl as gifts.

Traveling with him was an experience. If we stopped for gas, he would mosey inside the station while the attendant's back was turned and boost something. It didn't matter what it was. He just had to grab something, even if it was only a quart of motor oil. (Actually, the pickings were usually pretty good. Gas stations in those days were always giving away something, cheap promotional items like tinwear, dishes, or drinking glasses, so Slagel never came back to the car empty-handed. We'd give the stuff to the women who hung around the dressing room doors at the arenas.)

Another interesting character from those days was a tough old carnival wrestler named Earl Wampler. He had semi-retired from the business by the time I met him and was a wealthy corn and hog farmer, but he loved the wrestling lifestyle and would occasionally accept a booking just for old-time's sake. I wrestled him on a card at a softball park in Waterloo and made $50, the biggest payoff of my young career, enough to pay my hotel bill for a month, so I would have remembered him fondly even if I'd never seen the man again. As it was, he took a liking to me and became an occasional workout partner.

More importantly, Earl Wampler opened my eyes to the easy availability of women. During my night-time outings with Ray Steele back in St. Louis, I had seen firsthand just how attracted women were to pro wrestlers — they were the macho jocks of the era, long before Americans even acknowledged the sexual allure of famous athletes — but Wampler was the one who really eased me into the marketplace. He was living part

of the time with a widow in Osceola, a small town south of Des Moines. One time, he decided to drag me along and introduce me to the woman's daughter. One thing led to another and I ended up being a regular visitor. Earl would stay in one bedroom with the mother while the daughter and I occupied another. Thanks to him, and the girl, of course, just the mention of Iowa still puts a smile on my face.

In practically no time at all, I was offered the chance to move up in the business. One day near the end of that summer, Pinkie George called me into his office and asked if I'd be interested in going to Minnesota to work for promoter Tony Stecher. Promoters were constantly on the phone with each other, checking out how the business was doing and comparing notes on who or what was bringing in the money. So an opportunity arose. Stecher had simply asked Pinkie if he had anyone available, and Pinkie had replied he had a young Hungarian kid who was doing all right. Stecher was interested, so he told Pinkie to

sound me out about making the move.

I jumped at the opportunity. Stecher's territory was a big one — with shows running in virtually every town of any size in Minnesota, beginning with Minneapolis, one of the nation's big-money wrestling towns, plus the Dakotas and places across the Canadian border like Winnipeg. Its vast size was a drawback because travel was a bitch, especially during the winter months. That was more than offset, though, by the chance to earn bigger payoffs and to work for a man like Tony Stecher. He was one of the important powers in the business and was widely known among the wrestlers as that rarest of commodities: a promoter whose word was as good as gold. Personally, as a great wrestling fan, I was excited about meeting him because I remembered him as the manager of his brother, Joe Stecher, one of the very best wrestlers of all time.

All of the good things I'd heard about Tony Stecher turned out to be true. He was an authentic

gentleman, and he treated me fairly from the very beginning. For starters, he got me a special rate of $1.50 a day at the very prestigious Radisson Hotel in Minneapolis, which was like a gift to me. He was a decent payoff man, too, and he saw to it everyone worked regularly, which eased the money situation somewhat.

Being headquartered in Minneapolis also was a big plus. Fans of Chicago would probably disagree, but I believe Minneapolis is "The City" in the Midwest. It was a fun town with lots of great restaurants and interesting people, and Stecher saw to it you were taken care of. He was involved in the fight game as a promoter, so it was only natural he would know a lot of the mobsters, who also owned a lot of the city's restaurants and clubs. But they were okay people who treated us like royalty if they knew we were one of Tony Stecher's people.

I worked the Minnesota territory through the end of 1935 and the winter of early 1936, still

wrestling in prelims and learning my craft, and I would have been perfectly content to stay longer if the St. Louis wrestling office hadn't called with what sounded like an even better deal. Tony Stecher couldn't have been more supportive, so we parted on the best of terms, with the understanding I could return to his territory whenever I wanted. He was a man of his word, too, and I would return to work Minneapolis many times over the years. More important to me was the friendship that developed. Tony Stecher became one of my biggest boosters, and years later, when I was the heavyweight champion of the National Wrestling Alliance and constantly fighting with the member promoters, he was one of my staunchest supporters.

Although his reasons were rooted in a sad situation, Tony Stecher also provided me during that first year with one of my enduring memories: the opportunity to wrestle his brother, the legendary Joe Stecher. For me, a wrestling fan since age eight, wrestling Joe was like a baseball

fan being invited to pitch a few to Babe Ruth. He was the authentic article, one of the greatest wrestlers to ever pull on a pair of tights. During the days when one's ability as a wrestler still counted for something, he held the recognized version of the world title on three occasions.

Unfortunately, Joe Stecher came to a sad end. He had done extremely well in the wrestling business — for instance, in 1928, he earned a $29,000 payoff for a single match, which was a fortune — and was comfortably fixed for his retirement. But some whiz artists got ahold of him in the early 1930s and conned him out of almost every cent. It was an emotional shock from which he never recovered, and his brother ended up having him hospitalized for "melancholy" in St. Cloud, Minnesota.

That's where he was, in a sanitarium, when Tony Stecher arranged for several of us to wrestle him. Joe's doctors believed it might improve his mental state if he could actually wrestle again, so

Tony took him out of the sanitarium in the early part of 1936 and brought him to Minneapolis for a workout. I was one of several wrestlers who were invited to the gym, and it was a valuable lesson for all of us. Joe Stecher might have had some serious emotional problems, but there was absolutely nothing wrong with him physically. He was like a machine. He took on every single one of us, one after the other, and he outwrestled each of us in no time at all. My old trainer, George Tragos, was absolutely right about the importance of remaining humble. Here was a man in his forties who had been in a mental hospital for several years and hadn't trained or wrestled a lick during that period, and he went out onto the mat with a bunch of hungry, well-conditioned athletes and ate every one of them alive.

Sadly, nothing came of that episode. Joe Stecher was a very nice man, but while talking with him, we could see something wasn't quite right. Today, the doctors could probably treat whatever it was that afflicted him, but there was nothing to be done

for him in those days, so Tony had to put him back into the sanitarium. Several years later, in the early 1940s, Joe was transferred to a Veteran's Hospital, and that's where he remained until his death, at age 80, in 1974.

(Over the years, Tony Stecher would occasionally pass along messages to me from Joe, usually nothing more than a "hello." Tony said Joe always referred to me as "that kid from St. Louis," and I didn't mind. It was just so flattering that he even remembered me.)

I wouldn't presume to speak for the other wrestlers who were there that day, but it was an honor for me to go to the mat with the man. I'm sure part of it was my upbringing, learning to respect one's elders, but another part of it, without question, was my love for wrestling. A lot of boys couldn't have cared less about meeting an oldtimer, but I was awed to be in the company of men like Joe Stecher and others who were an important part of the history of pro wrestling. It

was an aspect of my personality that never really changed, even during those years when I was at the top of my profession. I was a fan, and I was never so full of myself that meeting the great wrestlers of the past wasn't one of the genuine thrills of my world.

I'd already had three such moments by the time I wrestled Joe Stecher, all of them during my stint with Pinkie George in Iowa. The first one occurred during a week-long swing through Nebraska, where we worked towns like Lincoln and Grand Island. I was riding with Ernie Dusek and one of his brothers, Rudy, through a small farming community when Rudy suddenly said, "Look, there's Grubby," and Ernie pulled the car over to the curb where a tall, skinny guy wearing overalls and a beat-up straw hat was loitering. Rudy, who was riding shotgun, leaned out the window and said, "Hey, Grubby! What are you doing in town?"

The man, who appeared to me to be retarded,

wouldn't even glance at us, but under his breath he muttered, "Get away! Get away!" So we drove off. I couldn't understand what was going on until Rudy turned to me and said, "Kid, that was Fred Grobmier, just doing a little business." What he meant was that Grobmier probably had some sort of con going on and didn't want us messing it up for him.

Fred Grobmier,[10] the "Iowa Cornstalk," was a legend inside pro wrestling, a guy who wasn't afraid to look the devil in the eye. At about 6-foot-3 and 180 pounds and with very homely features, he looked like Ichabod Crane, and that worked to his advantage — because Grobmier earned his living hustling the hustlers, beginning with the carnival wrestlers who regularly toured the Midwest during the early years of the 20th century. An excellent wrestler, he literally stumbled into the business off his family's farm when a neighbor persuaded him to accept the challenge of a carnival wrestler who was willing to pay $25 to anyone who could stay in the ring

with him for 15 minutes. Grubby beat the guy, and his neighbor cleaned up by making side bets. They did it again, several times, whenever a carnival came to town, and they eventually decided there was more money in wrestling than there was in farming, so they went on the road and hit the various carnivals.

The carnies were sharp, shrewd people who lived by their wits, and they worked a lot of angles when they came up against someone who could hold their own against their wrestlers. Grubby was another matter, though, because he played their game. He would disguise himself to look even more like a rube than he did naturally, and a lot of the carnies were taken in, to their ultimate dismay. Eventually, though, word got around the carnivals about this unlikely character who was beating their wrestlers and cleaning up making side bets, so they began watching for him. It got harder for Grubby to work his con game.

That's when he came up with the idea of hustling

the locals. Virtually any farming community of any size in the Midwest that was settled by European immigrants had a local wrestling hero, and a lot of barnstormers earned a living traveling from town to town and challenging them. Grubby did the barnstormers one better, though, usually drifting into a town around harvest time — that's when the farmers had some money — and establishing himself as the village idiot. He'd go to the local pool hall and bet on himself, only to lose on the simplest shots. He would challenge people to footraces and then fall down if it looked like he had a chance of winning. The idea was to get people smiling and reaching for their wallets when they saw him coming … and it worked.

Eventually he would get around to setting up a wrestling match with the local hero. Sometimes he would quietly arrange for another wrestler to come to town first and challenge the local guy. When the imported wrestler would lose, Grubby would challenge the local, to the delight of the hometown folks who could smell easy money. If the pickings

looked especially good, he might have some friends drift into town and spread around a little money, betting on Grubby.

Of course, Grubby would win the match, usually with some strange or unorthodox hold that would cause the locals to think he had won by accident, and they would demand a rematch, giving him an opportunity to clean up again. Sometimes he could milk a town for as much as $10,000 in one season, a lot of money in those days.

His reputation became so widespread across the Midwest by the early 1920s that he had to give up the con altogether and begin working the legitimate pro wrestling circuit, and that's where his legend was truly established. I'm not clear on whether the fans ever appreciated what they were seeing, but I can assure you the wrestlers did. By the time I came along, admiring stories about his ability were commonplace in dressing rooms all over the country.

One story in particular comes to mind. In New York City during the 1930s, he hooked up with promoter Jack Pfefer. One night, at the 168th Street Armory, Pfefer booked Grubby with Wladek Zbyszko, brother of the great Stanislaus Zbyszko, in a 30-minute draw. Wladek, who had a great body and an even greater ego, was appalled at the idea. He wasn't anywhere close to being the wrestler that his brother was, but he thought otherwise. He looked over at Grubby and saw this gawky beanpole with tobacco juice running down his chin, sitting on a bench with his skinny legs wrapped around each other like a grapevine, as was his habit. Wladek harrumphed and said in his thick Polish accent, "I vill crush him like a focking grape," his favorite expression. Grubby didn't say a word.

Well, they got into the ring, and Grubby immediately took Wladek to the mat … and that's where Wladek spent the next 30 minutes, eating canvas. At the end of the match, Wladek had a skinned nose, a skinned forehead, and a badly

bruised ego. Wladek was a gentleman about it, though, and in the dressing room afterwards, he strode up to Grubby in military fashion and said, "Mr. Grobmier, I apologize to you. You are a great wrestler."

Grubby looked up at Wladek and drawled, "Naw, I'm not a great wrestler … but then, you ain't either."

Getting to meet a legend like Grubby was almost as big a thrill for me as my second memorable meeting, which occurred one night the dressing room in Omaha before the matches. I was lacing up my boots when Ernie Dusek walked up and introduced me to a strange-looking old man who had come into the dressing room. "Kid," said Ernie, leading me up to this character, "shake hands with none other than the great Farmer Burns."

Farmer Burns! I couldn't have been more excited if Franklin D. Roosevelt had just invited me to

dinner at the White House! Martin "Farmer" Burns' reputation dated back to the late 1800s, first as an almost indomitable wrestler, and later as the trainer of some of pro wrestling's biggest stars, including Joe Stecher. An Iowa farmboy, he had never weighed more than 160 pounds in his prime wrestling years, but he had absolutely ruled the roost, including a two-year stint during the 1890s as the U.S. champion. Burns claimed to have wrestled more than 6,000 matches during his career and lost fewer than 10 of them, an incredible record when you consider that a large number of those matches, maybe even the majority, were probably legitimate contests.

I had already heard a lot of dressing room stories about the man and how tough he was, about how his neck was so strong — 19 inches around — that he could take the regulation drop in a hangman's noose and not get hurt, and I owned a set of his instruction books about wrestling, so it was on the level of a religious experience for me to meet him. He was in his seventies by then and not long

for this world, as it turned out, and frankly, he appeared to be a little demented — he kept slapping himself, hard, on the head as we talked. But it didn't matter. It was enough for me to just sit there with him. He was an important living link to the past, not only because of his own accomplishments, but because he was the man who discovered and trained "The Peerless" Frank Gotch, the man still regarded today by many as the greatest pro wrestler of them all.

Gotch was one of America's first sports superstars, beloved and admired by the news media and the public in the first decade of the 20th century, the man who accomplished for wrestling what John L. Sullivan did for boxing. Under Farmer Burns' tutelage, Gotch became the first American to actually claim the undisputed world heavyweight wrestling championship, and he was a participant in two of the most widely ballyhooed athletic events of that era, his contests in 1908 and 1911 with the "Russian Lion," European wrestling champion George Hackenschmidt, the man from

whom Gotch won the world title. It's no stretch to say he was one of the most famous people in America during the early part of the century.

Gotch was only 39 years old when he died — depending upon the source, of either uremic poisoning or syphilis — at his farm in Humboldt, Iowa, in 1917, four years after his retirement from the ring. His passing was a shock to the country, and he was eulogized in front-page newspaper articles and sports columns as the wrestler whose like would never be seen again.

And that's what brings me in a roundabout way to the other memorable meeting of my rookie year. Frank Gotch was undoubtedly one of the great wrestlers of all time, but whether he deserves to be remembered as the greatest is debatable. He was long gone by the time I came along, of course, so I have no first-hand knowledge of the man, but there were still a number of men around, like Farmer Burns, who had trained him and wrestled contests with him, and I was always curious about

the oldtimers and never shy about picking their brains.

The picture that emerged of Gotch from those conversations was of a man who succeeded at his business primarily because he was, for lack of a kinder description, a dirty wrestler. That's not to say he wasn't competent, because everyone I ever talked with said he was one of the best. But those same people described him as someone who delighted in hurting or torturing lesser opponents, even when they were supposed to be working out, and he was always looking for an illegal edge when he was matched against worthy foes. One of the oldtimers I met was a fine man named Charlie Cutler, who knew Gotch very well and claimed to have succeeded him as world champion (and lost the title in 1915 to Joe Stecher, another of Farmer Burns' students). According to Cutler, Gotch would gouge, pull hair, and even break a bone to get an advantage in a contest, and he was usually careful to have the referee in his pocket, too, in case all else failed.

The fans can debate the point all they want, but in my mind, there's no doubt — Frank Gotch was obviously very, very good, but he wasn't the all-time best. It's impossible for me to believe that anyone could have been better than the third legend I met that summer of 1935 … Ed (Strangler) Lewis.

Endnotes, Chapter 3

Chapter 4

I was introduced to Ed Lewis in Des Moines at the Coliseum where promoter Pinkie George staged his local wrestling cards. Ed was already in his forties by then, well into the waning stage of his prime, but his skills as a wrestler were such that he was still one of the most dangerous wrestlers in the world, and everyone knew it. In fact, his presence there in Des Moines is an indication of just how highly regarded he was. He

came down from Chicago with six other wrestlers to train for a shooting match in New York. The contest was supposed to settle a business dispute between two rival wrestling factions and Ed was the designated wrestler for one of the groups. That's how a lot of disputes were settled in those days, and the men who actually went into the ring were usually the very best men the quarreling parties could find.

Ed had been my greatest hero since I was a kid, so I was tongue-tied when I was introduced to him during a break in his workout. It was nothing magical or anything like that, just a handshake and "How are you, kid?" but it was a thrill for me. I dropped by the Coliseum every day during the next two weeks when I was in town, just to watch the workouts, and what I saw amazed me. Ed would line up all six of the shooters and take them one after another without a break, a fresh man every five minutes, and then he would run through them again. It was an amazing display of power and stamina, one made all the more incredible by the

fact that Ed looked as fresh at the end as he had at the beginning.[11]

Today's sportswriters and broadcasters like to wax nostalgic about the "Golden Age of Sports" in the 1920s, when athletics first became big-time entertainment in the United States and the heroes were larger than life. The names they always recite as evidence of the excitement of that era are legendary ones: Babe Ruth in baseball, Jack Dempsey in boxing, Bobby Jones in golf, Red Grange in football, and Bill Tilden in tennis. If they're thorough and not intent on ignoring history, they'll include Ed Lewis, too, because he was very much a part of that group. The fact is — and a look at the newspapers and magazines of that era will verify it — Ed (Strangler) Lewis was every bit as famous with the public and sporting press of that era as the others. He wouldn't have earned $16 million during his career — more than any of the others, including his friend, Jack Dempsey — if he hadn't been.[12]

He rose to the top of his profession and became an international name for the same reason that applied to Ruth, Dempsey, Grange, and the others: He dominated his sport. Sure, his sport was suspect, but Ed Lewis was the authentic item as a wrestler. If it came to actual wrestling, and sometimes it did in his era, no one was even close. He rescued pro wrestling at a time when it was floundering, and for that reason alone, he deserves to be respected and remembered by every wrestler and promoter who came after him. It's entirely plausible to me that, without him, there might not have been any professional wrestling in this country after 1920, certainly not on the scale it has enjoyed for the past 70 years.

In a lot of ways, he was most like Babe Ruth, who was a close friend and party pal to Ed. It's accurate to state that between them, they were the originators of the celebrity athlete, the sports star who lives an ostentatious life in full view of the public. Both loved action — bright lights, booze, women, crowds and adulation — and they could

still get the job done in their respective sports despite hangovers and sleepless nights. It had to kill a lot of their opponents. Here were these two guys out nightclubbing all night, hobnobbing with celebrities, boozing hard and banging the broads, and yet they could still get out in competition the next day against straight athletes who trained hard and didn't abuse their bodies … and they'd beat them.

Physically, Ed was no easier on the eyes than the Babe, but he was ideally put together for wrestling. He stood 5-foot-10 and weighed 240 solid pounds when he was in top condition. He had massive bones, gigantic wrists and forearms, a 54-inch chest, and a 22-inch neck that was like pulling on a telephone pole when you locked up with him. He also was sway-backed, which may seem like a curious thing to list as an asset, but it made his legs hard to reach if you attempted a double- or single-leg takedown. Add to that his great balance and extremely quick reflexes, and what you had was a superb heavyweight wrestler.

Other wrestlers had similar attributes, to be sure, but Ed had two additional qualities that elevated him above them all: endurance and a superior mental attitude. His stamina was absolutely amazing for a man so bulky. He was like a long-distance runner in a field of quarter-milers and sprinters, and he could — and did — literally wrestle for hours without noticeably tiring. When he saw that his opponent was beginning to weaken, that was when he turned on the heat. That remarkable stamina, coupled with his confidence in his abilities and his knack for focusing completely on whatever he was doing, accounted for his attitude, and that was really his winning edge. Ed Lewis was easily the most positive thinker I ever met. When we were traveling together in the 1950s when he was my manager and advance man, he would say to me, "Hunky, I'm like a damn monkey! Every day is a brand new day!"

Anyone could have risen to the top with Ed Lewis' abilities. What really separates him from the others in my mind, though, is that he

accomplished what he did despite some incredible handicaps. He was a heavy boozer, which certainly took its toll, and he often was overweight. Women were a serious distraction, too, what with several marriages and a steady parade of willing females wherever he went. There were serious physical problems, too, beyond the weariness of constant travel and the usual aches and injuries incurred in the wrestling ring. He was especially prone to staph infections, usually the result of wrestling on dirty mats, and his body would erupt regularly with painful boils and carbuncles. Since there were no antibiotics to treat them in those days, he just endured them.

Worst of all, though, was the trachoma. You don't hear much about it anymore. It's a desert disease, a highly contagious infection of the eye that can cause blindness, and it was the scourge of the wrestlers for years. It spared no one, not even the top stars, and Ed caught it early in his career from a couple of American wrestlers who had picked it up while touring Egypt. By the time he

had become the biggest name in the business, in the early 1930s, he was beginning to go blind and, on his worst days, could see nothing more than the outline of shapes.

Today, trachoma can be treated with antibiotics. The only treatment in Ed Lewis' era, though, was rubbing the eyes with a bluestone, which wasn't very effective and was considered more painful than the disease itself. I consider it a miracle that I never caught it because it was still around when I became a pro. I worked out many times with older guys who had the disease, some of whom actually had pus running from their eyes, and I was certain I'd come down with it eventually. I even had the bluestone treatment twice, just as a precaution, but it did nothing except inflame my eyes. Somehow I avoided the disease, and to say the least, I consider myself extremely lucky. That someone could wrestle effectively with trachoma was remarkable; that someone could achieve the heights that Ed Lewis achieved despite the affliction was nothing short of

incredible. The man was simply one of a kind.

Ed Lewis' real name was Robert Herman Julius Friedrich. He was born in 1890 in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, the only son of a German immigrant couple, and he learned his wrestling as a kid in the traditional way, by competing at ethnic gatherings and beer busts where the wrestling was staged as entertainment. He obviously had a knack for it because he was wrestling professionally throughout the region at age 15. At some point early in his career, he made his way to Chicago, the center of the U.S. wrestling scene at the time, and one of only three places in the world — the others were St. Louis and Wigan, England, between Manchester and Liverpool — where a wrestler could learn the art of hooking. It was time well spent because he was a feared man in pro wrestling by his early twenties.

In early 1913, he adopted the name under which he would become famous. Where the Ed came from, I can't say, but the Lewis definitely came

from Evan Lewis, the Strangler, another native of Wisconsin who was a top pro during the late 1800s. Evan Lewis' trademark hold was a form of the headlock that was literally a stranglehold. He would slip his wrist down below his opponent's ear, over the carotid artery, and squeeze, shutting off the blood supply to the brain and putting his opponent to sleep.

It was a legitimate hold in Evan Lewis' day, but it was illegal by the time Ed came along. However, all the hookers knew the hold and Ed learned it in Chicago. Wanting something to excite the crowds, he adopted it as a performing hold. That's how the headlock came to be such a standard hold in the wrestling business — as a cover-up for the stranglehold or sleeper. (For the record, a headlock is not a legitimate wrestling hold, especially from the standing position, because your opponent is usually behind you, where he can put you in serious jeopardy.)

Since he had adopted Evan Lewis' stranglehold

and last name, it was only natural that Ed borrow the "Strangler" nickname, too. He clinched a national reputation for himself in 1915 when he won an international tournament in New York City. However, he couldn't capitalize on it because the promoters in the big-money towns in the East were pushing their own boys. Besides, they were hesitant to do business with him because he had joined forces with a man named Billy Sandow who, as Ed's manager, was a notoriously tough negotiator when it came to money. It was easier and cheaper for the Eastern promoters to promote their own people, so they simply froze out Ed and Sandow, forcing them to return to the Midwest.

This was the era when the wrestling game came close to hitting the absolute bottom. Frank Gotch had retired in 1914, and no one had come along to replace him in the public's affections. Interest in pro wrestling also had waned because the fans had grown bored with the slow, scientific matches that were the style of the day. Worst of all, though,

was the bad publicity. The news media had caught on to the behind-the-scenes manipulations of the second Gotch-Hackenschmidt match and were exposing pro wrestling for what they thought it was. Many newspapers simply stopped covering pro wrestling, except to report on the seamier aspects.

Only in the Midwest was wrestling still attracting paying customers, and the reason was people like Ed Lewis and Joe Stecher, who were natives of the region. There was an extremely loyal base of wrestling fans there, many of them European immigrants who had never lost their love for the sport, and they were a ready-made audience for the pro version. Ed and Sandow decided to tailor their in-the-ring product in a way that pleased the established market and also accommodated the tastes of the newer one. They speeded up the wrestling, introduced time-limit matches — which added another dimension to pro wrestling in terms of how to perform a match — and invented flashy new holds and finishes, and the

money began rolling in like never before.

Actually, the idea to change the manner in which wrestling was presented belonged to neither Ed Lewis nor Billy Sandow. It came from a third person, Joe "Toots" Mondt, a wrestler from Greeley, Colorado, whom Farmer Burns had recommended to Ed as a training partner. Toots was an excellent wrestler — according to Ed, one of the best of that era — but his impact on the business was greatest as an idea man. He was a born con artist, corrupt to his soul, always looking for an angle to make a buck, and pro wrestling was the perfect venue for him. He was the one who suggested that speeding up the matches, setting time limits, and introducing more spectacular moves would attract paying customers. Toots was responsible for adding another wrinkle to the game that is also still in existence today: wrestling as a packaged show. In fact, it was probably his greatest contribution. Up to that point, wrestlers moved around a lot on their own, like the old barnstormers, getting bookings for themselves

wherever they could, usually no more than a date or two in any one town, and promoters acted as little more than matchmakers. Toots' idea was that it made a lot more sense economically to handle the business much like a vaudeville show — maintain a stable of wrestlers and stage the bouts as a package, replacing some of the talent every so often to keep things fresh.

Ed and Sandow decided to give it a try, and, again, they succeeded beyond their wildest dreams. Sandow "stabled" a lot of wrestlers with verbal contracts, tying them up and keeping them away from the competition, and he leaned hard on promoters to convince them that cooperating with the trio was a lot more lucrative than operating independently, especially if they wanted Ed Lewis on their cards.

It was a money-making machine. Business was so good in the Midwest that the trio decided, in 1920, to tackle the Eastern combine led by New York promoter Jack Curley on its own turf, running

matches of their own in the combine's towns. It was no contest as Ed and his two partners were soon outdrawing the old bosses, and the combine members decided they had no choice but to capitulate. The "Gold Dust Trio," as latter-day historians sometimes referred to Lewis, Sandow and Mondt, soon had the entire U.S. wrestling business in the palm of their hands.

Ed's attitude during this period was strictly businesslike. He saw himself first and foremost as a wrestler, and he was wrestling for only one reason — because it provided the sort of money that he needed to live the style of life he wanted to live — so whatever helped the business, not necessarily Ed Lewis personally, was the course he chose. He had absolutely nothing to prove to the wrestlers themselves because he was openly acknowledged within the industry by then as the superior talent, by far, so it meant nothing to him if the best decision for all concerned was for him to look like less than he actually was. For instance, if he went to a town to wrestle and found himself

booked with an opponent who was a good athlete and popular with the fans, Ed recognized the fact that it made good sense for him to go out there and carry the guy to a good match, simply because it meant he could come back in two or three months and do it all over again, usually before a bigger house.

A strategic match was okay, too, if it helped at the box office. In 1920, he won the world heavyweight title for the first time, beating Joe Stecher. Business was great for a while, but once it began to fall off, Ed and his partners decided to give the public a new champion. Politically, they wanted to do something that would make the Eastern combine happier with them, and so, early in 1921, Ed happily dropped the title to Stanislaus Zbyszko, a top card who was controlled by the Eastern combine. (Ed's philosophy was: Work hard, play hard. I'm sure he was ready to drop the belt and play for a while.)

Zbyszko was a superb wrestler, one of the few

men Ed Lewis ever acknowledged as a peer, but he was an old man by then and totally lacking in color. He wouldn't adapt to the newer style of faster wrestling, preferring to stick with what he knew. Business became so bad with the old Pole as champion that there was no choice but to switch the title again. Zbyszko was a proud man, but he, too, was a businessman and agreed something had to be done. On March 3, 1922, in Wichita, Kansas, Zbyszko dropped the title back to Ed Lewis in a match said to have been the first ever broadcast on radio. It was a good decision because the switch signaled the beginning of a two-year run that was the Gold Dust Trio's most lucrative period.

Of course, wrestling being the sort of business it is, the only people who were really happy were Ed and his partners. Controlling the world title was like owning a key to the bank, so promoters everywhere were constantly conspiring to swipe it for themselves. In the fall of 1924, Billy Sandow provided them with the lever to do it when he

began making an attraction out of Wayne Munn, a 6-foot-6, 240-pound former University of Nebraska football player. For ballyhoo purposes, Sandow called him "Big" Munn. Ed and Toots taught him how to perform a match, and off they went. Ed and Toots protected Munn all the way to keep him from getting into a match with someone who couldn't be controlled. Munn was a big box-office hit, and on January 8, 1925, in Kansas City, Ed dropped the world title to Munn. It was an important moment in pro wrestling's history because it was the first time that a pure performer, a non-wrestler, had worn the belt — and it set the stage for what happened next.

About three months later, Munn appeared in Philadelphia, one of the Eastern combine's cities, for a match with Stanislaus Zbyzsko. It was supposed to be a performance, but the old Pole, who was still a key performer for the Eastern group, double-crossed Munn and beat him so thoroughly and so convincingly that the referee — one of Sandow's employees, by the way —

stopped the match and awarded the title to Zbyzsko, primarily to avoid a riot. Zbyzsko and his partners in the Eastern combine knew that Ed Lewis would be hot on their heels, trying to take back his title, so a few weeks later, Zbyzsko dropped the belt in St. Louis to Joe Stecher, the one man they figured could possibly handle Ed if it ever came to a legitimate contest.

It was a confusing scene from then on. Stecher was so afraid of a double-cross himself that he all but retired with the title, even refusing matches with some of his so-called friends in the Eastern combine. Meanwhile, figuring he would never get Stecher in the ring with Ed Lewis, Sandow applied political pressure in several states that regulated pro wrestling and persuaded many of them to throw out Zbyzsko's win over Munn, which meant Munn was still recognized as champion in those states. Since Munn had proved he couldn't protect himself, the trio promptly switched the title back to Ed. Now there were two world champions: Ed Lewis and Joe Stecher.

Finally, on February 20, 1928, in St. Louis, Ed and Joe Stecher settled accounts, with Ed taking two of three falls and uniting the two titles. Again, I don't know the behind-the-scenes details, but I can say with certainty it was a performance match. Maybe Stecher agreed to it because he was tired of looking over his shoulder, worrying about Ed or a double-cross. Maybe the two men had concluded between them that they simply couldn't continue to wrestle many more of those dull, inconclusive contests without hurting the business.

Whatever the facts, they were rewarded handsomely for their efforts. The match attracted a crowd of more than 7,000 people, which was a good house in those days, and brought in an incredible $65,000, the second-largest gate in wrestling history at that point behind the $87,053 that Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt had drawn in their 1911 rematch in Chicago. Stecher's share of the purse was $29,000, enough to take the sting out of giving up his share of the title. (In those days, it wasn't unusual for the champion to

occasionally get as much as 75 percent of the gate.)

Ironically, that match was actually the beginning of the end for the Gold Dust Trio. By that time, relations had become strained between Billy Sandow and Toots Mondt, who had ambitions of his own. A short time after the title unification match, Toots left the partnership. He quickly got involved with a wealthy man in Philadelphia named Ray Fabiani, a concert violinist and wrestling promoter who was a member of a politically well-connected family, and then he began talking to the other Eastern promoters who had once been his enemies.

In practically no time at all, Toots became one of the most important players on the national wrestling scene. He persuaded the Eastern promoters to unite behind a tough German wrestler named Dick Shikat, and then he used the group's political connections with the state athletic commissions in New York and Pennsylvania, two very important wrestling markets because of their

population bases, to get formal title recognition for Shikat. Once again, pro wrestling had two world champions.

Within a year, Toots had finagled himself a piece of the New York wrestling office operated by Jack Curley, Rudy Miller, and Jack Pfefer, probably the most lucrative booking operation in the country. Toots wasn't content, though. He quickly expanded the operation, bringing in Rudy Dusek from Nebraska to handle bookings for all of the southern states, from Washington, D.C., to Florida, and he persuaded Chicago promoter Ed White to handle the office's bookings in the Midwest.

White was an important addition to the group because he also was the manager of a very good wrestler named Jim Londos, one of the rising stars of that era. Londos was another of pro wrestling's immigrants, a Greek whose real name was Chris Theophilus. He had worked as a circus strongman and acrobat in his native country. While learning how to wrestle after he came to the States, he

supported himself by working as a dishwasher in a Greek restaurant. He discovered he had an almost natural feel for the sport — and the business, too, since he wasn't exactly loaded with scruples. Sometime around 1915, he turned in his apron and hit the road as a barnstormer, eventually adopting the ring name of Jim Londos, a variation on Jack London, a very popular writer at the time.

A handsome guy with a good body, Londos became a big wrestling attraction in the late 1920s despite a great deal of bad publicity about various swindles he had worked here and there during his barnstorming days. Most of his victims were Greek businessmen who were gullible enough to bet big sums of money on Londos in a lot of his matches, while Londos was secretly betting against himself through carefully placed bets of his own. Toots Mondt liked what he saw — he obviously recognized a fellow thief — so he switched his version of the world title from Shikat to the colorful Londos in 1930. New York was the media center of the country in those days, so

Londos got plenty of publicity, which the New York office used to build him into a national sensation.

Toots was determined to become the boss of the entire wrestling industry, and the only real hurdle standing in his way was his former partners, Ed Lewis and Billy Sandow, who were still prospering. About a year before Toots switched his version of the title to Londos, Ed and Sandow had cut a deal of their own with Boston promoter Paul Bowser, who was making a fortune in his territory with a performer named Gus Sonnenberg. Sonnenberg had been a star college and pro football player in the 1920s, a nationally recognized name, and Bowser had persuaded him that, like Wayne Munn, he could capitalize on his fame, by becoming a professional wrestler. Pro football wasn't the attraction in those days that it would become later, and the money was next to nothing in comparison, so Sonnenberg decided to give it a try.

"Dynamite Gus" Sonnenberg proved to be such a successful attraction in the Northeast that Bowser decided to make him a national star. He was cordial with Toots, but since Toots had his own plans, Bowser turned to Ed and Sandow. They agreed that Sonnenberg had real potential, so they decided to help him. On January 4, 1929, Ed dropped his version of the world title to Sonnenberg and the two men immediately took their title "feud" on the road, playing to big houses wherever they went. It was almost identical to the situation Ed had worked with Wayne Munn, only much bigger.

Sonnenberg's success was probably one of the factors that caused Toots to switch his title to Londos, who was much more colorful than Shikat. Once that was accomplished, Toots put the next phase of his plan into motion, sending Londos and Shikat on the road to the same towns that Sonnenberg was working, and having them challenge Sonnenberg in the press to a straight-up contest that would settle the world title

situation. It was something that was never going to happen, of course, because it wouldn't have been a contest in any sense of the word. Sonnenberg was strictly a performer, and a very limited one, while both Londos and Shikat were dangerous wrestlers. Besides, Ed Lewis was acting as Sonnenberg's policeman, and every time Londos or Shikat publicly challenged Sonnenberg, Ed responded by saying they'd have to wrestle him first. It was a stalemate because neither of Toots' boys wanted anything to do with Ed Lewis.

Toots and his partners didn't care, however, whether they ever got Sonnenberg in the ring. The only thing they were interested in doing was discrediting him, and they figured the constant pressure would eventually create the impression in the public's mind that Sonnenberg was a chicken champ. They even went to the extent of booking one of their own wrestlers as Gus Sonnenberg in several areas where there was no state regulation of wrestling and having him lose his matches. The publicity began to sting Sonnenberg.

It finally became obvious to Paul Bowser that something had to be done after Londos arranged for a friend of his, an accomplished middleweight wrestler, to confront Sonnenberg on a crowded street in downtown Los Angeles and eye-gouge him, and then give him a thorough beating. The publicity about that episode — a little guy beating up the world heavyweight champion in front of witnesses — was disastrous, so Bowser decided he had better put the title on someone who could actually handle himself. On December 10, 1930, without telling Ed or Sandow, Bowser switched the title from Sonnenberg to Ed Don George, who had been a collegiate star at the University of Michigan and a member of the 1928 U.S. Olympic wrestling team.[13]

Bowser's double-cross effectively stripped Ed Lewis and Sandow of their power. Suddenly, they had no leverage, neither a world title nor an affiliation with either group that claimed a title. It looked like they had been brought to heel, that their days of dominance were finally over.

That's exactly what Ed and Sandow decided they wanted people to think. Any fool could see that Bowser's unannounced title switch had shut them out, so Ed and his manager played it cool for a while and simply waited for an opportunity to have their revenge. They had nowhere to work except for Bowser and Toots, so they became very humble and endured the gloating. Ed even lost matches to several wrestlers just to prove that he had been tamed. Finally, on April 14, 1931, Paul Bowser decided to reward Ed for his good behavior with a title match in Los Angeles, one of the towns where Ed was a very big draw. Years later, Ed Don George himself related to me what happened that night.

"We were supposed to work a three-fall match, and I was going to win, of course," George said, laughing at the memory. "We come out to the center of the ring for the referee's instructions, and Ed says to me, real casual and friendly, 'Well, Don, tonight's the night.' I knew immediately what he was saying — he was going to take back the

title — and all I could think of to say was, ‘Oh, no.’ Ed smiles and says, ‘Oh, yes. Now, how do you want to do it? Do we give the fans a great match or do we wrestle?’ We were close friends, and we both knew that I couldn’t beat Ed wrestling on my best day, so I just shrugged and said, ‘Well, Ed, why don’t we just give them a great match, okay?’ And that’s what we did. The only difference was that Ed was the one whose hand was raised at the end."

Ed’s double-cross was almost too much for Paul Bowser, who had started it all. He was absolutely livid, and he immediately began plotting his revenge. Three months later, he got it, in Montreal, in a match that came to be known in knowledgeable circles as the "Battle of the Bite." Ed’s opponent was a French wrestler named Henri Deglane, one of Bowser’s boys who was a popular attraction with the French Canadians. He was a mediocre wrestler at best and absolutely no match for Ed in a contest, so Ed entered the ring without a worry in the world. The

match was supposed to go three falls, with Ed winning, and it unfolded exactly as planned through the end of the second fall.

In those days, in a two-out-of-three-falls match, the wrestlers always returned to their dressing rooms between falls, ostensibly for a rest. The real reason, of course, was to give the fans time to hit the concession stands and spend more money. That night, in the dressing room during the break after the second fall, on instructions from Paul Bowser, Deglane bit himself on one of his arms, close to the armpit, until he drew blood. When he went back out for the third fall, he kept the bite covered up until he and Ed had locked up, and then he began screaming like he had been stabbed or something. Ed had no idea what was happening, so he released Deglane and stepped back. The referee — who was innocent of any involvement — stepped in and immediately saw the blood on Deglane's arm and chest. Deglane insisted that Ed had bitten him, and there was the evidence, so the referee immediately disqualified

Ed and declared Deglane the winner and world champion by disqualification.

Ed had another surprise waiting for him back in his dressing room. When he walked in, there was a gloating Paul Bowser, and standing alongside him were five or six hoods armed with baseball bats, just in case Ed decided to give Bowser some trouble. Ed sized up the situation immediately and decided to play it very calm. "You think you've stolen something from me, but I couldn't care less," he told Bowser. "You've actually done me a favor. I'm fed up with this scene, and I'm already booked in Europe, so you can have the belt. I don't need the title where I'm going. Besides, I've already proved to you that I can take it back if I decide I want it."

Maybe it sounds like Ed was merely trying to put the best possible face on a bad situation, but the truth is he had indeed decided to call it quits, at least as a full-time campaigner. He was already in his forties by then, he had some money put away,

and he was tired of the grind. What he wanted most was a long vacation, and he had already arranged a series of lucrative bookings in Europe that would more than cover his expenses. The only change in his plans was that he wouldn't be taking his world heavyweight championship with him, but that proved to be no disadvantage. In the eyes of the reporters who had witnessed the Deglane match, Ed had been robbed, and that's how they reported it. As far as the news media and the fans were concerned, he was still the champion.

Ed stayed in Europe for several months, living the good life and wrestling in front of sell-out houses. When he finally returned to the States, little had changed on the wrestling scene. Toots ruled the roost with Jim Londos as champion everywhere except in the Northeast and Canada, where Paul Bowser continued to push Henri Deglane as the titleholder. Ed could have worked for either group — in fact, each had sent word that he was anxious to talk business — but when the press met his boat in New York, Ed told them he

was semi-retired and not interested in working regularly for anyone. An occasional wrestling date would be fine, he said, if the money was right, and he was available for duty as a special referee on big cards. Otherwise, he said, don't bother me.

He did agree, though, out of loyalty more than anything else, to let his old manager and partner, Billy Sandow, arrange a lengthy series of bookings around the country, but their long-running relationship soon came to an abrupt end. It happened in Kansas City, where Ed had accepted a match with his former policeman, John Pesek, a very good wrestler who deserves to be listed with the great old-timers. Pesek had agreed in advance that Ed would win the match, but when Ed and Sandow arrived at the arena, Pesek saw that Ed was in terrible shape. He had been boozing for months in Europe and was badly out of condition, his body had erupted again in boils, and his trachoma was bothering him so badly he couldn't find his way to the dressing room without Sandow's assistance. Pesek figured the fans

would riot if he lost to someone so obviously out of shape.

So Pesek sent a note to Ed's dressing room, spelling out his concerns and announcing that he had changed his mind; Ed would have to lose that night. Ed got very angry, but Sandow obviously had no confidence in him. "C'mon, Ed, let's get out of here," Sandow said. "This isn't our night." Ed insisted on wrestling, though, and Sandow lost his temper. "Look," he said, "I'm your manager, and if I say we're leaving, then we're leaving!" Ed stared at Sandow for a moment and then replied, "I'm the wrestler, and I say we're staying." Sandow, who could be a very unpleasant guy without trying too hard, said some nasty things and stormed out of the dressing room, slamming the door behind him and effectively signaling the end of their relationship. 12

When it came time for the main event, Ed went out and wrestled a competitive match with Pesek, pinning him clean in the middle of the ring in

something like six or seven minutes. As Ed was sitting in his dressing room, waiting to be called for the second fall, a runner arrived with another note from Pesek. "I'm sorry," the note said. "I misjudged you. Let's perform the rest of the match." Ed sent back a note of his own: "Go fuck yourself. Tonight we're wrestling." And he went out and beat Pesek in the second fall, quicker than he had beaten him in the first one.

It was somewhere during this period, early in 1932, that Ed had his revenge on Paul Bowser for the "Battle of the Bite" in Montreal and regained his title, although you'll search in vain for a record of the switch. Bowser had switched his version of the title from Henri Deglane back to Ed Don George a few months earlier, and he apparently figured Ed Lewis could be trusted because he booked the two of them together in Los Angeles, the same place where Ed had taken back his title a year earlier. According to Ed Don George, the exact same thing happened again — Ed came to the ring and announced that he was taking back the

belt, and Don had no choice but to go along with him. Unlike the first time, however, the switch didn't stick. Bowser used his pull with the state athletic commission to throw out the result. Ed didn't really care, though, because his only reason for doing it had been to give Bowser a headache.

(A lot of title switches that occurred during that period were never acknowledged. In most cases, it was merely a matter of a promoter cynically switching the title to give the paying customers something to talk about. The following night, in another town, the belt would be right back around the original champion's waist. A fan would have had to attend literally every match in the country to keep an accurate record of the various title switches. Promoters could do pretty much whatever they wanted to do, even in those areas where pro wrestling was supposed to be regulated. The various state commissions were concerned only about collecting the taxes wrestling generated — most of which went to pay for state supervision of boxing, a so-called legitimate sport

which did not generate nearly as much money — and if a promoter told them a title switch hadn't really taken place, then so be it. Most of the commissioners were on the promoters' payrolls, and they were happy to do what they were told.)

After his split from Billy Sandow, Ed returned to Nekoosa, Wisconsin to live with and care for his aged parents. Who should turn up at his door one morning in 1932 but his other old partner, Toots Mondt. Despite the split years earlier that had spelled the end of the "Gold Dust Trio," Ed and Toots had remained close friends, and now Toots needed Ed's help. In typical wrestling fashion, some of Toots' partners were conspiring to screw him, and he had gotten wind of it. Jim Londos and his manager, Ed White, had decided they no longer needed Toots and his New York crew, so they decided to split, taking their version of the world title with them. Toots had smelled out their scheme, though, and laid a trap for them in New York, where Toots planned to have Dick Shikat double-cross Londos and steal back the

title. Londos and White figured out what was happening at the last minute and skipped town.

Toots had been smart enough, however, to get their signatures on a contract for the match with Shikat. He complained to the New York State Athletic Commission, which was already in his pocket, and it declared Shikat to be the world champion by forfeit — in New York, that is. Londos and White couldn't have cared less. Toots could have New York and they'd take the rest of the country.

Naturally, Toots still wanted it all, and that's what brought him to Ed Lewis' door. He knew Ed was the one man in the country who would have no trouble beating Londos in a contest, if they could only get him into the ring, so Toots made Ed an offer: If you'll come in with me and help me corner Londos, I'll give you a piece of the New York booking office. Ed agreed to do it, primarily because he hated Londos — "That yellow Greek sonofabitch" is how Ed always referred to him —

and dearly would have loved to get him in a contest.

Ed's return to the pro wrestling wars was accompanied by the damndest round of behind-the-scenes maneuverings and double-crosses the business has ever experienced, and it would require a book the size of an encyclopedia to recount everything that happened during the next couple of years. At one point, there were a total of five different wrestlers claiming the world title, including Ed, who won Toots' New York version as part of the campaign to corner Londos.

It was an incredibly crazy scene, but the key event is easy to pinpoint. In 1933, Londos and White decided to fight Toots and the New York booking office on their own turf, and they persuaded one of Toots' partners, the wily little Russian Jew, Jack Pfefer, to help them do it by jumping to their camp and running their New York office for them. A year later, in yet another double-cross, Londos and White decided to make

peace with their enemies, cutting Jack Pfefer — who was their own man, remember — out of the deal.

The result was a peace treaty involving virtually all of the major promoters in the country. It ended the war and established, in effect, a monopoly that effectively tied up almost all of the good wrestling talent in the country. The participants, Toots and Ed among them, agreed that Londos should be the undisputed world heavyweight champion, and they eased the Greek's fears of a double-cross by putting up $50,000 in cash as a guarantee he would not lose the title until he agreed to do so. As a further gesture of cooperation, Ed Lewis finally let Londos have a victory over him, in a match in Chicago that drew an unheard-of gate of $96,000, a record that would remain unchallenged until 1952, when Baron Michele Leone and I broke the $100,000 barrier in a match at Gilmore Field in Los Angeles.

It was a cozy — and flagrantly illegal —

arrangement, and everybody profited. Everybody, that is, except Jack Pfefer, who had been shut out of the monopoly and was struggling to survive with a handful of independent wrestlers. Pfefer vowed to either "rule or ruin" the wrestling business, to use Ed Lewis' description, and once Pfefer realized none of the other promoters were interested in helping him, he decided to go public and expose the business. The New York sportswriters, especially New York Daily Mirror sports editor and columnist Dan Parker, had a field day with Pfefer's revelations. Parker occasionally wrote columns in which he accurately predicted the winners of an upcoming card … including the length of time of each fall and the finishing holds. The stories spread across the country, with devastating effects for the wrestling business.[15] Gates dropped off to nothing almost overnight, and the thieves began to fall out, as thieves will do. Toots was one of the first to go, walking out on the New York office and heading for the West Coast, where he became a partner of Lou Daro, who ran southern California.

The title situation remained a mess, too, until about 1935 when a small group of promoters in the Midwest put a version of the belt on a good wrestler named Everette Marshall, who was managed by Ed Lewis' old partner, Billy Sandow. Boston's Paul Bowser was still pushing his version of the title in the Northeast and Canada, and even Toots Mondt had a version of the belt in California, but the belt around Marshall's waist was the only one with widespread credibility, for one simple reason: The Midwest was the only part of the country where pro wrestling was drawing money. Jack Pfefer's vendetta against the business had pretty much killed wrestling everywhere else.

Ed Lewis' role in all of these shenanigans was pretty much behind the scenes, although he did wrestle a couple of well-publicized legitimate contests during that era. One of them was prior to the peace treaty, on December 5, 1932, in New York City's Madison Square Garden, and pitted him against my idol, Ray Steele, in a contest that was supposed to settle the war between the Toots

Mondt and Jim Londos factions. Londos was indeed yellow, at least when it came to facing Ed Lewis, for he had talked Ray into taking the match in his place and even helped him train for it.

Ray was an absolutely super wrestler, one of the greats, but he never should have accepted the match or allowed Londos to coach him. Londos advised him to wrestle barefooted against Ed because he knew Ed would use his weight advantage and power to push Ray around the ring. The wrestling shoes in those days had leather soles, which were slippery, and Londos figured Ray would be better able to withstand Ed's bulldozer tactics if he didn't wear shoes.

When they came into the ring for their contest, Ed saw that Ray was barefoot and began shaking his head. "Pete," he said, calling Ray by his real name. "That yellow Greek sonofabitch has given you some bad advice. You're going to get your feet cut up if you wrestle like that." Ed was barefoot himself, but he often wrestled without

shoes and his feet were tough. Ray ignored him, figuring Ed was simply trying to psych him out, but sure enough, after about 30 minutes, the rough mat had peeled the skin off the soles of Ray's feet and he was walking in his own blood. Ed liked Ray and could see he was having a problem, so he suggested Ray could end it if he would simply slug him, which would force the referee to disqualify him. This time, Ray listened to what Ed was saying, and that's how the match ended, with Ray's disqualification. The outcome didn't help Ray's standing with the fans, but the biggest loser was Londos. Everyone knew he hadn't had the balls to face Ed, and the fact that he had talked Ray into taking the match and then given him bad advice, as well, hurt his reputation considerably.

Ed's last competitive wrestling match occurred in 1936 in Madison Square Garden, when he was 46 years old. The outcome of that contest says almost everything that can be said about the man's abilities. I don't know what the beef was, but the match was supposed to settle business differences

between two factions, which meant each side had sought out the best representative it could find. Ed's opponent was a sharp young wrestler from Kansas named Lee Wykoff, a former workout partner of mine.

Ed was the favorite to win the match, but as luck would have it, he separated a clavicle during training. It's a disastrous injury for a wrestler, and believe me, I know because I've separated both of mine. It can take up to six months of recovery time before you can even raise your arms properly and have any power at all. Incredibly, Ed decided to go ahead with the match. Many years later, when he told me the story, I told him I couldn't understand why he didn't cancel.

"We couldn't," he said. "We had money up as a guarantee that we'd appear, and we would have forfeited it if we cancelled."

"Well," I said, "couldn't you have gotten it postponed until you'd healed? You certainly had a

valid medical excuse."

Ed just shook his head and grinned, sort of embarrassed. "You know, this might sound very stupid to you, Hunky, but I actually thought I could beat the guy with one good arm. I guess it was a foolish thing to do," he said. Then he began to tell me about the match itself.

"We went a little more than two hours, and Wykoff couldn't do a thing with me. He knew about the separated clavicle, though, and he had beat on it every chance he got. The pain was absolutely excruciating, the worst I'd ever experienced, but I wouldn't let him get me. I figured if I just kept after him, he would finally make a mistake and I'd hook him. I couldn't corner him, though, and the referee finally stopped it and called it a draw."

And then Ed said something that absolutely astounded me: "You know, Hunky, I've always thought of that match as the best contest that I ever

wrestled."

At first I couldn't understand what he meant, but it finally dawned on me. Here was a man who had wrestled them all, the very best in the profession, from all parts of the world, and he had dominated them. He'd accomplished all that, though, when he was at his peak. In this case, against Lee Wykoff, he seemed to have everything stacked against him; he had a very bad injury, he was in very poor condition, he was practically blind from the trachoma, and he was certainly a long ways over the hill from his better days. To have survived against a young, fit, hungry opponent, one that I personally knew was an excellent wrestler, was truly an incredible feat.

There's no doubt about it in my mind: Ed Lewis lived on a plateau by himself.

Endnotes, Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Tony Stecher would probably have been happy to keep me around the Minnesota territory as long as I wanted to stay with him, but six months was about the maximum run a wrestler could expect to have anywhere in those days, and I was approaching that limit by the early spring of 1936. I was ready for a change of scenery, anyway, having seen enough snow and treacherous winter roads to last me the rest of my life.

It had been a productive time for me. I had progressed quite a bit as a performer, and I had even managed to put away enough money to buy my first new car, a six-cylinder Dodge with heater and radio that cost me $760. But it was clearly time to move on. I was still wrestling mostly opening matches and was hungry for main-event money. Of course, so was every other pro wrestler, and there were probably upwards of 1,500 of us around the country in those days.

Today, with television, a wrestler can become a star almost overnight, and he doesn't even have to know a wrestling hold. Back then, it took months, sometimes years, before a boy could break out of the pack. It was easy for a wrestler to get trapped in the prelims because that's how the fans came to think of you, as strictly an "underneath" boy, and even if a promoter happened to like you and was willing to use you higher on his cards, he wouldn't do it if you were already working on the bottom of his cards. What he would usually do, if he liked you enough to use you again, is have you finish your bookings, leave the territory for a while, six months or so, and then bring you back later with a fresh push.

In my case, the St. Louis wrestling office solved my dilemma when they called and said they could use me if I wanted to come back. Obviously, I said yes. St. Louis was my home, and I missed it — my family, the Business Men's Gym, Ray Steele, and the other wrestlers who had become good friends — and I'd gone as far as I could with Tony

Stecher. It also was the realization of one of my dreams: to work for what was then one of the most important wrestling offices in the country.

One of the first things I did upon returning to St. Louis was make peace with my parents, and that turned out to be a lot easier than I had expected. Our bitterness a year earlier hadn't endured, not when it came down to my actually leaving, and we had stayed in close touch during those months while I was working the Iowa and Minnesota territories. I returned home to find they had become both proud and supportive of me, so I was welcomed back with open arms.

I resumed my routine of daily workouts at the Business Men's Gym with George Tragos, Ray Steele, and whoever else happened to be around. Promoter Tom Packs didn't use me a lot on his local cards, and when he did, it was only underneath, but it was a step up the ladder all the same. At least I could add St. Louis to my resume, and that carried weight elsewhere in the country.

The real bonus for me came on the road. The St. Louis office loaned me out regularly to promoters throughout the Midwest — decent wrestling towns like Kansas City, Wichita, St. Joseph, Evansville, Indianapolis, and Nashville — and I could sense something was happening after a couple of months when those promoters began asking for me. One day, the St. Louis office called and said I was needed that night in Wichita, to substitute for Ray Steele in a match with the world heavyweight champion, Everette Marshall. Ray had a legitimate conflict, so the promoter had asked for me. It was my first main event in a major town, and my payoff was the lordly sum of $90. That's the night when I decided I was going to make it as pro wrestler.

But not too long afterward, something happened that almost sent me back to my father's shoe-repair shop. I was working out regularly with the big boys in St. Louis by then and I was becoming rather cocky. Everyone kept telling me how much I was improving, pumping up my confidence, and I suppose I figured that I was close to being a

world-beater.

One day, Ed Lewis came to town, en route to a booking somewhere as a special referee, and he dropped by the gym. A lot of the boys began telling him about this young hotshot he ought to work out with, and Ed, who was always curious about new talent — and who feared no one when it came to a contest — was more than willing to do it.

I must have been crazy because I actually thought I could take him. I was in tremendous shape and had been holding my own in workouts with some of the top wrestlers in the St. Louis office, so I was anxious to show my stuff. One thing I definitely had going for me was speed. I was a legitimate heavyweight by then, about 220 pounds, but I had the God-given reactions of a quick middleweight, which awed everyone around the gym. "Go for the single-leg takedown as soon as you get in there and take him down," they told me as I prepared for the workout with Ed. "You're way too fast for him,

Lou. There's no way he can stop you."

When we came out onto the mat, Ed looked at me and said, "Hey, I remember this kid. We met last year in Des Moines." He couldn't have been more cordial, and I was flattered that he remembered me. He was genuinely trying to put me at ease.

"Now, look, kid," he said, just before we started. "Forget who I am, okay? As far as you're concerned, I'm not Ed Lewis. I'm just another wrestler. This is a friendly workout and I've got nothing to prove here, I'm just interested in seeing what you've got, so give it your best." And then we went at it.

It was an educational experience, in terms of both wrestling and humility. Ed Lewis was 46 years old and out of condition, but you couldn't tell it by what happened that day. My first move was the single-leg takedown. I faked for his head and then dropped to the mat, reaching to snatch his leg ... but it wasn't there. Before I could react, he was

behind me, one of the points of advantage in both pro and amateur wrestling, and that's where he stayed. I couldn't get him off of me. I tried everything I knew, but he stayed right there. It was the longest 15 minutes of my life. Finally, he called an end to it. He helped me up, shook my hand, and slapped me on the shoulder. "Good workout, kid," he said. "You did okay."

I was absolutely humiliated. I shouldn't have been, of course, because this was Ed Lewis, but I didn't see it that way at the time. I was so discouraged and embarrassed that I packed my gear immediately after the workout and headed home to brood. The next day I dropped by promoter Tom Packs' office and told him I was quitting the business. I was serious about it, too. I returned home and told my father I was ready to get serious about being a shoemaker.

And I would have done it … except for Ed Lewis. As soon as he heard from Tom Packs about what I'd done, he did a very classy thing. He

picked up the phone and called my father.

"Your kid's got everything it takes to be successful in this business," he told my father. "I can understand why he feels the way he does, and maybe you'd prefer to have him in business with you, but I hope that you'll encourage him not to quit."

That's really all it took. Pop was absolutely in awe of Ed Lewis, and he couldn't have been more excited or flattered that this great athlete, one of his heroes, would take the trouble to pick up the phone and call him. Any lingering doubts he may have had about my decision to become a pro wrestler were dispelled with that call, and Pop immediately sat me down for a long talk. It was really amazing if you think about it. A year earlier, we had a nasty fight when he had all but ordered me to give up my wrestling, and now here he was arguing that I should stick it out. After thinking about it for a couple of days, I decided to give it another shot.

That workout with Ed Lewis was an invaluable experience for me. George Tragos had pounded it into my head that you should never get overconfident, that there was always someone waiting down the road who could take you down, but obviously I had forgotten that. Ed Lewis brought it back to me in spades, and I can assure you … I never forgot it again.

Not too long after that episode, sometime in the early summer of 1936, Tom Packs called me to his office and said Lou Daro, the promoter in southern California, was interested in using me. It sounded like an attractive opportunity. It would be another chance to see some more of the country and maybe move up the ladder a rung or two, and I had heard Lou Daro was a very good promoter with lots of arenas, which meant more pay days. I was happy in St. Louis, but I could see I was a long way from making main-event money there, so I accepted. I bought a one-way airline ticket to Los Angeles, kissed the family goodbye, and headed for the coast.

Southern California would become a very lucrative area for me later in my career, and I was to have some wonderful times there. But I never could bring myself to buy into its picture-postcard image of sun, palm trees, and beautiful people having the time of their lives because of what happened during my first stint out there in 1936. It was one of the worst experiences of my wrestling career.

A simple misunderstanding on Lou Daro's part accounts for some of my bad feelings. He was a Hungarian Jew, and he had sent for me because he had heard I also was a Hungarian. When he learned I was half-German and not Jewish, he lost interest immediately. That sounds crazy, sure, but that's what happened. It became obvious, quickly, I couldn't expect any kind of a push, that I was going to remain a preliminary boy. In fact, my very first booking wasn't even on a regular wrestling card, but at a carnival sponsored by the local Hungarian community. The only memorable thing about it was that actor Bela Lugosi — a Hungarian

who became famous in the movies and on stage playing "Dracula" — made a celebrity appearance in my corner.

Daro's decision to forget about me was a relatively minor reason for my bad feelings, however. Far more serious was the way I was treated by another individual, and it's not exaggerating matters to say the fallout from that association affected the course of pro wrestling … at least, as far as I would have a role in it. Who knows how things would have unfolded over the years inside pro wrestling if I hadn't crossed paths with Ed Lewis' former business partner, Toots Mondt?

Toots was a very bright guy, one of the sharpest people in the wrestling business, and he understood all aspects of it. In his earlier days, before he wrecked one of his knees, he was one of the top wrestlers in the country. In fact, Ed Lewis, who seldom praised anyone, claimed Toots and Stanislaus Zbyzsko were about the only two people

capable of giving him a hard time, and he believed Toots was the better man of those two. Why they had such a close relationship for so many years was something I could never understand because once I got to know both of them, I could see they were nothing alike. It began — and ended, too, as far as I was concerned — with one central difference: Toots Mondt was a thief.

A lot of wrestlers used to enjoy swapping stories about some of Toots' stunts: about how he had filched money out of wrestlers' pay envelopes, about the time he hocked his wife's clothes so he could place a bet on a horse, about the time he and promoter Ray Fabiani salted a "gold" mine in California and swindled an old lady by getting her to invest in it. I never saw any humor in those stories, though, to me, a thief is a thief, no matter whose money he's stealing.

When I arrived in Los Angeles during the spring of 1936, Toots was acting as Daro's matchmaker for several of the arenas, including the Olympic

Auditorium, one of the big wrestling arenas on the West Coast for years, and he alone decided what the payoffs should be for the wrestlers. Since the Olympic was doing regular sell-out business at the time, about $10,000 a week, and the other clubs were doing real well, too, you would think the boys would have enjoyed a larger portion of that money. Toots, however, saw to it that he and Daro were the only ones in the gravy, and knowing Toots, I have to wonder if Daro got a straight count. Everyone else was literally starving. The underneath boys, people like me, were getting no more than eight or 10 dollars a night, and maybe grossing $50 a week, if they were lucky enough to work four or five dates. That wasn't enough money to even cover expenses.

It was worse than anything I'd experienced during my worst days in the Iowa territory, when I was stealing fodder corn at night just to eat. I had to dip into my savings almost from the day I arrived, and I could see I was going down the drain fast if something didn't happen for

me. Things got so bad I took a day job with a wrestler named Tiny Roebuck, who had a nice little business going for himself capturing and breaking wild mustangs, straight off the deserts of California and Utah, for the movie studios. I risked serious injury doing that, just so I'd be able to eat. (There was one plus to all this: I learned to keep a candy bar in my wrestling bag for an energy jolt just before a match. It was a habit I observed for years.)

This went on for almost three months, and I was about ready to call it quits when salvation arrived in the form of Ray Steele, who was working some main-event dates on the coast. I told him about my situation and asked him if he knew the promoter in San Francisco, Joe Malcewicz, who had opened up his operation earlier that year. As luck would have it, that's where Ray was headed, and he promised he would put in a good word for me when he got there.

About a week later, I got a call at the fleabag

hotel, the Barbara, where I was staying. It was Joe Malcewicz himself, telling me to come to the office. It was like throwing a lifeline to a drowning man. I told him I'd be there in a flash, just as soon as I finished my dates for Toots. (Maybe that sounds strange, given my situation, but a wrestler couldn't walk out on his bookings in those days, even if the promoter wasn't paying him. If you were booked someplace, you went — because the fan paying his money at the gate might have been there specifically to see you. Never disappoint the fans, was the rule. Besides, if a wrestler skipped, he knew the promoter would simply pick up the phone and call around to the other promoters, seeing to it the wrestler was blackballed wherever he tried to go. It was cold-blooded, but that's the way it was.)

The first person I looked up was the hotel's manager, a nice lady who ran the place for the owner, Jack Dempsey. I had fallen behind in my rent, but she remained patient with me, which was

remarkable. The Barbara was home to a lot of old fighters, pimps, whores, and other people who didn't exactly inspire confidence. She listened to my story and said she would trust me for what I owed her, that I could just send her the money when I had it. Which is exactly what I did … immediately after my first booking with Malcewicz. She could have caused me trouble, but instead she let me leave, and that's a kindness I've never forgotten.

I would never forget Toots Mondt, either. He remained an important power in pro wrestling for many more years, and it was difficult at times to avoid the man, particularly after he got involved in the New York wrestling office again in the 1940s, but he never put his hand in my pocket again. The scar he put on me that summer by trying to starve me and other wrestlers never faded because I wouldn't let it. Before leaving Los Angeles, I vowed I'd make him pay for it, and I'm proud to say I did. Years later, in New York, when he owned a piece of Antonino Rocca and was making

a fortune off that poor soul, and later yet when he was involved with Bruno Sammartino, he came to me with hat in hand and wanted me to take care of his guys. In each case, I was the world champion at the time and could have helped their careers. Not only did I refuse, I did what I could to hurt Toots' business. He tried several times over the years to make amends, but I saw to it I was never again in a listening position when it came to dealing with Toots Mondt. If we talked at all, I did the talking.

San Francisco would have seemed almost like heaven to anyone who'd endured what I had in Los Angeles, but what I found when I finally got there was even better. There was San Francisco itself, of course, which is one of the great cities in the United States, and Ray Steele was still there when I arrived, so it was like old times. And then there was Joe Malcewicz, the promoter. He was a super nice guy, an ethnic like myself, and we hit it off from the very start. I was thrilled to be in his company because he was another of the legendary

oldtimers I found so fascinating, a guy who had wrestled on the mat with the best of them, including Ed Lewis and Joe Stecher, and I loved hearing his stories.

Financially, though, times remained pretty tough for a while. I remember one booking in Reno, Nevada, where I arrived with empty pockets. I hadn't eaten a meal in 24 hours, and if we hadn't been paid in cash immediately after the matches that night … well, it might have been another 24 hours before I ate. As it turned out, I grabbed my payoff and ran for the closest restaurant I could find still open late at night. I could only afford a hamburger, but I recall it as one of the best meals of my life.

Other guys had similar stories, but unlike what had happened in Los Angeles, none of us blamed the promoter. Malcewicz was more than fair to us, and he was one of the rare promoters who never forgot what it was like to be one of the boys. He paid us what he could, but he had been running the

territory for only a few months at the time I joined him and he hadn't had time to build anything. He simply wasn't drawing any money yet, and we all understood.

In my case, I was even more willing than the other boys to tolerate the poor payoffs as long as humanly possible because I was more than compensated in another way: Joe Malcewicz had introduced me to Ad Santel, who had agreed to help polish my wrestling.

It's safe to say that very few people today, even those inside the wrestling business itself, recognize the name Ad Santel. If they do, they probably remember him only as the guy who was the wrestling promoter for years in Oakland, across the bay from San Francisco. I remember him vividly for another reason, and so do the others from wrestling's earlier days who are still around, because Ad Santel was one of the greatest hookers of all time, maybe even the best. "Superhooker," we called him.

Santel was a Kraut whose real name was Adolph Ernst, and I would imagine that in his prime he looked like a junior-heavyweight version of Ed Lewis — big bones, oversized hands, heavy muscles. He'd claimed the world light-heavyweight title for 16 years, from 1912 to 1928, but it hadn't been all that lucrative, primarily because the fans were more interested in the heavyweights. What's more interesting about Ad Santel is that he was a key player in one of the greatest pro matches in history, the 1911 rematch in Chicago between Frank Gotch and George Hackenschmidt.

If you know your wrestling history, you certainly know most of the details about that event: that Gotch had defeated Hackenschmidt in 1908 in a straight-up contest to become the first American to claim the world heavyweight wrestling title; that Hackenschmidt claimed to have been the victim of foul tactics on Gotch's part and had campaigned for a rematch; that the rematch was indeed signed, and that three weeks before the big event,

Hackenschmidt suffered a serious knee injury during a workout; that the promoters, having already spent the money from advance ticket sales, pleaded with Hackenschmidt to keep his injury secret and go through with the match; that Hackenschmidt agreed, provided Gotch agree to let him win one fall and otherwise carry him to a satisfactory match; that Gotch agreed, only to double-cross the helpless Hackenschmidt in the ring and pin him in two straight falls.

What you perhaps don't know about that episode is that Ad Santel is the wrestler who injured Hackenschmidt's knee, and that Gotch's people paid him $5,000 to do it, just to insure a victory for their boy. Hackenschmidt later claimed publicly that Dr. Benjamin Roller, a fine wrestler who was one of Gotch's policemen, had accidentally injured him during a workout, but that's simply not true. I can only speculate he named Roller because he believed wrestling fans would recognize the name and, knowing of the longtime relationship between Roller and Gotch, accept Hackenschmidt's story

about being set up. What stumps me is why Hackenschmidt thought the fans would buy the story without also asking him what he was doing working out with a known associate of Gotch in the first place.

According to Ad Santel's version of the rematch, he was just a poor young immigrant from Europe, fresh off the boat and looking to connect in pro wrestling when Hackenschmidt's people came across him. Santel had a reputation as an excellent wrestler in the old country, so Hackenschmidt's people signed him up as a training partner in preparation for the big rematch. Gotch's people, also aware of his reputation, approached him privately and put $5,000 in his hand, saying all he had to do to earn it was cripple Hackenschmidt. "It looked like five million dollars to me," Ad told me. "I'd never seen that much money in my life, so I agreed to do it and make it look like an accident. I know it sounds like a terrible thing to do, but that's the way it was in those days. That's one of the reasons why I

decided to learn everything I could about hooking — to protect myself."

By the time I met him, Ad was already in his fifties and, long retired as a wrestler, a respected businessman in Oakland. He still loved a workout, though, whenever he could find someone who wasn't afraid of him, and I jumped at the chance when he approached me. I was always looking for good workout partners, and I had already heard enough stories about the man by then to know he was more than capable. I also figured I might pick up a hook or two along the way.

Ad used his connections to get me a room at a drastically reduced rate in an exclusive private club in Oakland called the Athens Club, and it was my home during my stay in Joe Malcewicz's territory. It couldn't have been more convenient for us. Since the club included a large athletic facility and private workout rooms, all I had to do for a private session with Ad was walk down the stairs from my sixth-floor room.

It's only a guess, but I'd have to say Ad and I worked out together no less than four or five days of every week during the five months I worked the territory. I'm not guessing, however, when I say it was the most intensive training period of my life, and it certainly opened my eyes about wrestling. I thought I knew a little bit about it by then, thanks to my sessions with George Tragos, but Ad Santel showed me that I had only scratched the surface.

It was hooking that interested me most, and once he had become satisfied I was serious about my wrestling, Ad decided to induct me into the club. That's exactly how I thought of it, too, like an initiation into a very small fraternity, and I was honored that this wonderful old man thought enough of me to pass along his secrets.

What can I tell you about hooking? Well, all I can say is no matter where I put my hands on him, Ad could hurt me. And I mean HURT me. Once, when Joe Malcewicz dropped by and was watching one of our workouts, I had Ad face down

on the mat and was behind, hovering over him. I reached between his legs, trying to turn him over for a possible pin, and he hooked me so quickly and forcefully he almost broke my arm.

"What are you doing?" Joe screamed at Ad, rushing onto the mat. "I finally get a guy I can make some money with, and here you go trying to cripple him!"

A typical promoter's reaction. I would have laughed, too, as Ad did, but he had indeed come very close to breaking my arm, which stayed sore for several weeks and forced me to skip a few bookings. That was the price of learning how to hook, however, and I was willing to pay it. In every case, Ad would only take me up to the point of almost seriously hurting me, just to show me what was happening and how it felt, and then he would release me. Then we would go through it again, slowly, step by step, repeating everything I'd done, and he would show me where he sprang the trap. Then he would have me try the hook, over

and over, until I got it right.[16]

It was an incredible gift that Ad Santel passed along to me that fall in Oakland, and I can't emphasize enough how precious it became during the course of my career. It was like having a reputation as a dangerous gunslinger — the reputation alone was enough to keep most people from getting cute with me in the ring. It's absolutely true. Once in a very great while, someone would decide to wrestle me, just to see what I could do, but unless the guy was another hooker — and we were a very small club — it was never a contest. I almost never had to use a hook to get the job done, but the point is that I could have, if it had become necessary.

Frankly, I would have regarded that stint in the San Francisco territory as a personal success even if I'd never made a dime. That's how important those workouts with Ad Santel were to me. Things worked out extremely well on all fronts, however, because business began to pick up while I was

there and we actually began to make some money. Joe Malcewicz liked me enough to give me some main events against good opponents, and the end result was I actually managed to save a couple of thousand dollars.

(One of those main events is especially memorable, primarily because I've never been more embarrassed in my life. I was booked with Gus Sonnenberg, the former world champ, but that's beside the point of this story. In the dressing room that night, while waiting to go on, I'd gotten involved in a poker game, something that happened in most locker rooms. I was sitting there in my robe, completely absorbed in the game, when I heard them announce my match. I jumped up and dashed into the ring. As the referee was giving us our instructions, Gus and I opened our robes so the ref could examine us for oil and the legendary "foreign objects." As soon as I opened my robe, Gus' mouth dropped open about a foot. I looked down and discovered I was wearing only my jockstrap! I had gotten so involved in the poker

game that I had forgotten to pull on my tights! I raced back to the dressing room, put on my trunks, and dashed back to the ring … and to the first standing ovation of my career. The incident even made the next day's newspapers.)

In late November, the St. Louis wrestling office called to say they had been hearing good things about me. It looked to them that maybe I was ready for bigger things, and if I could make it back by Christmas, they said, they could use me. I was nearing the end of my run in the territory and had been thinking about returning to St. Louis, anyway, to spend Christmas with my family, so this was welcome news. I said yes without hesitation and gave my notice to Joe Malcewicz.

A tough wrestler named Ira Dern — he had held world titles as a middleweight and light-heavyweight in the 1920s before moving into the heavyweight ranks — was headed in my direction by car, so I hitched a ride with him. He also was the promoter for Salt Lake City and much of Utah

by then, so he gave me a couple of bookings in his territory that paid me enough to cover all of my expenses for the trip, including my train fare from Salt Lake City to St. Louis.

The year was certainly ending on a happier note than had seemed likely to me only a few months earlier in Los Angeles. I arrived back in St. Louis with a sharp wardrobe, money in the bank, an impressive resume, and plans to marry the girl I'd left behind.[17] Things looked even better after I had a chance to sit down with promoter Tom Packs, to find out what he had in mind for me. Pro wrestling was in a slump at the time, all over the country, even in the Midwest, and Packs was looking for someone fresh who could draw some money. He said he had been impressed by reports about me from Malcewicz's territory, and since he had always had it in his mind to develop me as a hometown-boy attraction, he had decided it was time to give me a push and see what happened.

Packs' hopes for me rose even higher when he

began to hear stories from his people at the Business Men's Gym, where I resumed my regular workouts. Suddenly, it seemed, guys I couldn't handle a year earlier weren't even a good workout for me. I borrowed Ed Lewis' old workout routine, lining up five or six boys and taking them on, one after another, without a break, a fresh man every five minutes, and I wasn't even breathing hard at the end. It was the payoff from all those workouts with Ad Santel, and even my old coach, George Tragos, admitted he was amazed at the improvement.

"You're in a different class now, Lou," he said one day, shaking his head. "It looks like you're really on your way to the top."

That was an important moment for me. Tragos had finally said a kind word about my wrestling, and it meant a lot to me. Neither of us would have dared predict at that moment, however, just how fast I would rise, that I would reach the top — a version of the world heavyweight championship —

within the next 12 months.

Endnotes, Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Tom Packs did not plan to make me the world heavyweight champion when he began my push in 1937. In fact, it wasn't even a consideration. We knew the title was the ultimate goal, but it was a long way down the road.

In those days, the champion was someone who was a proven draw at the box office and, at the very least, someone who appeared to be a credible wrestler. I was improving fast and making a reputation for myself in the industry, but the central and most important fact is I was just a 20-year-old journeyman wrestler with less than three years professional experience. People like me didn't become the world champion in that era.[18]

Packs' plan was merely to give me a strong build-up — mainly in St. Louis' three daily newspapers, all of which provided heavy coverage of the local wrestling scene — and see if he could make some money with me. If the fans responded, I'd get better and better bookings, higher and higher up the card, and maybe even a title match in the end.

For all intents and purposes, he set his plan in motion in December 1936, about a week after I'd returned to St. Louis from San Francisco and before I'd wrestled a single bout. His publicists planted my name in a newspaper story promoting an upcoming card that mentioned Packs was "negotiating" with several top wrestlers for an upcoming "all-star show." The brief plug, which was the first real mention I'd received in a hometown newspaper, compared me favorably to Ray Steele and noted I had recently beaten former world champion Gus Sonnenberg on the West Coast.

About a week later, another paper carried a lengthy story about the promising young "hometown boy" and my upcoming St. Louis "debut" at the Auditorium. A couple of days after that, yet another story appeared mentioning I was "regarded at this time as ‘the next champion’ by students of the game."

It was all ballyhoo, of course, designed to do nothing more than create interest in me. Whatever happened in the ring was up to me, but I was ready. This was the big break of my dreams.

I started low on the cards in January 1937 with a couple of wins. The crowd reaction to both matches was good, so Packs booked me late that month with my good friend Warren Bockwinkel, who took the loss. Again, the response was good, so Packs moved me up the ladder another rung, to the middle of his next card.

In my next booking, I beat a fairly well-known guy named Whitey Hewitt in something like six

minutes, an outcome designed to impress upon the fans that I was a real comer, and the crowd — a very good house, just over 7,000 people — reacted so positively, Packs decided it was time to try me with a big-name opponent. The next card, on February 10, was a big one, with Everette Marshall defending his world title in the main event against a top attraction named Ali Baba, one of several boys who had held a version of the title during the Jack Pfefer-inspired madness of the mid-1930s. Packs put me in the semi-final with Hans Steinke, a gigantic guy — 6-foot-6, 245 pounds — who was known to fans as the "German Oak," an apt description. Hans was a nice old guy who had been a fairly big name for years, so our match was billed as an important showcase for me. The card drew 8,500 people, a big house in those days even by St. Louis standards, and the reaction was so strong when I beat Steinke it overshadowed the main event.

Tom Packs decided to put me on the road for several months, booking me in big towns

throughout the Midwest and Texas, billing me as the Missouri champion, a title with some credibility. The wire services — United Press, International News Service, Associated Press — moved the results of main-event matches from many of the major cities in those days, and suddenly fans all over the country were reading my name, which was the whole idea. We actually teased a couple of title shots for me, once in St. Louis, when I was a "surprise" last-minute substitution against Everette Marshall, and later in Kansas City, when we wrestled a one-hour draw.[19]

The idea behind all this was simply to build interest in a single match, in St. Louis, where I would beat a top wrestler, thereby setting the stage for a third and final confrontation with Everette Marshall. Marshall would win the rubber match, of course, but if the match-making was done correctly with the right guy, someone who could create the possibility in the fans' minds that I actually had a chance to defeat the world champion, then a Thesz-Marshall match just might

do sell-out business and cinch my future as a main-eventer. The guy Packs selected was George Zaharias, a very credible wrestler and a top card around the country.

George's name is probably familiar to a lot of older sports fans today as the guy who married Mildred "Babe" Didrikson, the greatest female athlete of that period and probably one of the greatest of all time. Babe was truly one of a kind — an All-American in basketball, a three-medal winner in the 1932 Olympics (the silver medal in the high jump and gold medals in the javelin and 80-meters high hurdles), a natural over-achiever at whatever sport she tried, including baseball, bowling, tennis and even boxing, if you can believe it. In the 1932 women's AAU championships to select the U.S. Olympic team, she entered eight of the 10 events and won six, all on the same day, setting world records in three of them. Her individual point total was so high she literally won the team competition by herself, finishing eight points ahead of the 22-member

runner-up team from the University of Illinois.

Her greatest acclaim, however, would come as a professional golfer. She won 31 tournaments during her career, including 10 majors, and would certainly have won more if she hadn't died of cancer in 1956 at the young age of 42. A lot of the top male golfers of her day refused to play her in exhibitions because they feared — and rightly so — she would embarrass them. I played a lot of golf myself during the late 1930s and early 1940s, thanks to George, who introduced me to the game, and I became a pretty fair player. I never had any illusions about my ability, though, because of Babe. When George and I were wrestling in Indianapolis on a regular basis, the three of us had a regular golf date at the Speedway course the day after the matches, and it was all I could do to stay close to George, who was a damned fine golfer. Neither of us, however, could come within shouting distance of Babe. We could outdrive her off the tees, but from there to the pin, it was all Babe. She was simply incredible, the best golfer I

ever knew, man or woman.

George was a big name in his own right, probably the top rough wrestler during the mid-1930s, and he became even bigger after he and Babe got married in 1938 because Babe was big news in that era. (Their wedding was held at Tom Packs' house, and the guests included most of the "Gas House Gang" from the St. Louis Cardinals, most of whom were wrestling fans. It was a flattering moment for me to attend their wedding because, aside from the groom, I was the only wrestler there.) A Colorado native, George had become a main eventer in the early 1930s as the "Crying Greek from Cripple Creek" — because he would "beg" for mercy when his opponent finally got tired of George's roughhouse tactics. Fans hated him and they would pay good money for the chance to see him beaten. The boys loved him, though, because he drew a lot of money. We could always count on a good payday when George was on the card.

He was actually a pretty fair wrestler, too, especially for a guy whose weight sometimes ballooned upwards of 300 pounds, and it was a serious mistake to take him lightly. One guy who made that mistake was Dorve Roche, a reputed tough guy out of Decatur, Illinois. I was watching from the wings one night in Atlanta when Roche decided to "test" George during a performing match. George was a lot like Ed Lewis, as his fleshy body covered a lot of solid muscle, and he simply used his strength to wear down Roche. Once he had Roche on the mat, George tortured him; he would let Roche squirm and wiggle and strain until he had worked himself maybe three-quarters of the way out of danger, and then George would reach out a big paw and snatch him back, like a cat playing with a mouse. Roche finally ran out of gas and George pinned him easily.

A lot of people in the industry thought pretty highly of Roche and not a lot of George, so word about their match was a hot topic in a lot of

dressing rooms for awhile. The outcome didn't surprise me because I already knew George could get the job done when it came to actual wrestling. He had been one of my workout partners at the Business Men's Gym almost from the time I returned from San Francisco, and I was well aware of his ability.[20]

We had become close friends, but it wasn't friendship that caused George to agree to our big match. He was genuinely happy to see me getting my shot, but business was business, and he had to look after himself, so he did what any intelligent wrestler with leverage would do: He refused to accept the booking unless he was well-paid. After all, he was a main-event attraction around the country, while essentially, I was a nobody. If he was supposed to help me, he deserved to be compensated. In the end, Packs had to come up with several thousand dollars before George finally agreed. (Actually, it was no skin off Packs' nose. He was really no different from any other promoter in the country when it came to taking care

of himself first. Since I was supposed to be the beneficiary of George's loss, Packs simply deducted money from my payoffs for awhile until he had his money back.)

Packs scheduled our match for November 10, but he didn't announce it right away. First, he had to see if he could raise interest to the highest possible pitch, so he pulled out all the stops. He used George for four bi-monthly promotions, high on the cards, with decent opponents, and he had George beat them all. In each match, George wrestled rougher than the one before, and that created a lot of anger with the fans, who became anxious to see someone clean his plow. That someone was supposed to be me.

The Thesz-Zaharias match was announced a week ahead of the actual date, and the newspaper publicity dwelled almost exclusively on what I'd describe as the "popular hometown youth faces crucial test" angle. According to the stories, I was the clean-cut "young scientific matster" who had

won the hearts of the fans and was being rewarded with his first main-event match in his hometown. Zaharias was the "biggest challenge" of my brief career, the newspapers said, depicting George in story after story as the "ace roughhouse artist" of professional wrestling, a guy with a national reputation of "checking the careers of several other youngsters," who themselves had once looked promising. My future clearly depended on whether I could handle him — and the stories were slanted to make it look doubtful I could.

As a final touch to insure a good house, Packs loaded the undercard with four good matches, using guys like Orville Brown, a popular attraction from Kansas City, and George's younger brother, Chris "Bad Boy" Zaharias, who was a good rough card in his own right. The semi-final was a main-event caliber match in itself — Ed Don George, the former Olympian and one-time world champion, against Frank "Powerhouse" Sexton, a husky London, Ohio farm boy who was known as

"the man of 1,000 holds." A couple of poor prelims can hurt or even kill a good main event, but this was one of those nights when the excitement built perfectly, match by match. The paid attendance was 7,500, the second-biggest house of the year for Packs, and by the time George and I went out, the crowd was primed. And so was I.

It was one of the best matches of my young career, thanks in large part to George, who carried the action. (In those days, it was usually the heel or the most experienced of the two wrestlers who "called" the match in the ring. You can talk to each other in there, you know, and that's how we paced our matches, keeping a close ear to what the fans were doing.) George was the aggressor right from the bell, creating anger and building the match to my big comeback, and it couldn't have unfolded better. He used every rough tactic in the book — strangleholds, punches, knees in the stomach, slugging me on the break and when I was in the ropes. I tried two or three comebacks, but every

time it looked like I was ready to fight back, George would stop me with some foul tactic and then resume punishing me.

The match lasted about 30 minutes, just long enough to create the kind of reaction George wanted, so we went to the fall. As one of the local papers reported it the next day, "Lou finally got mad." I hit George for the first time in the match, dumping him on his butt, and it brought the crowd to its feet. George came back with a desperation flying tackle, knocking me down, and as I jumped to my feet he launched another one. I sidestepped him, though, scooped him up in a crotch hold and slammed him, three times, and then fell across him for the pin.

The crowd erupted with the loudest roar I'd received in my career, and I felt at that moment,for the first time, the adrenalin rush other wrestlers told me they got after an especially good match. It was the high all performers love, whether they're actors or singers or athletes, and I understood

immediately why some wrestlers could never bring themselves to leave the profession, why they'd stay long past their primes. The rush was addicting, and as satisfying as the money it paid. God, what a feeling! So what if the match wasn't 100 percent competitive wrestling? We had given the fans exactly what they had come to see, and that's what professional wrestling at its best was all about.

The match was supposed to be the high point of my blitz. Packs had accomplished everything he could have hoped for, and I couldn't have been happier. In the carnival slang, my career was "made." One final step remained: I would wrestle Everette Marshall for his version of the world title and go to either a draw or a close finish, allowing me to save face and not ruin all we had accomplished. Packs set the match for December 29, 1937.

A strange thing happened to change all those plans. Tickets went on sale two weeks before the match, and they were snapped up so fast it looked

like it would be the elusive sell-out every wrestling promoter in the country was chasing. No one had anticipated such a stampede. Packs and Everette Marshall's manager, Billy Sandow, looked at each other when reports started coming in from the box office, and one of them said something like, "Wait a minute. Let's rethink this."

Everette Marshall was another Coloradan who had been a good card as champion, but professional wrestling was still in a box-office slump all over the country, and that was the case even when Marshall was on the card. He had wrestled in St. Louis several times without attracting this kind of interest, so Packs and Sandow concluded I was responsible. And if I could do it in St. Louis, they reasoned, maybe I could do it elsewhere, too.

It wasn't public knowledge, but Sandow was Packs' partner in the St. Louis promotion, and between them they, by means of controlling most of the Midwest promotions, controlled a prominent

version of the world heavyweight title.[21] Deciding the championship was strictly a cold-blooded business decision between the two men; the wrestler who could draw the most money at the gate was the one who got to wear the belt. (As to who would have won in an actual contest, I think I would have. I wasn't as seasoned a wrestler as Everette, but I was in condition. I had been training for the match for four weeks while Everette was on the road, wrestling at night and traveling during the day. The advantage Everette had in experience I had in being conditioned to wrestle for hours without a break. Everette's enormous strength was countered by my reflexes. I was honored just to be in the ring with him, and I would have done whatever I was told. All that's beside the point, though, because a week before the match, I was declared the champion by Packs and Sandow, based on points — as in dollar points, that is.)

It would be dramatic to say it was probably the most thrilling news of my career, that I was about

to take the title, but it wouldn't be accurate. Sure, I was enormously pleased and excited, but I was wise enough by then to the ways of promoters to see it exactly for what it was — a business opportunity, a chance for me to earn top dollar. It sounds cynical, I know, but the belt Packs and Sandow were preparing to put around my waist could just as easily be taken away.

In retrospect, maybe I came to feel that way because the match itself was nothing special, certainly not as good as the match with George Zaharias, and because things didn't exactly work out for the best in the long run. The sell-out didn't develop, although we came close, 7,500 people, which was enough to persuade Packs and Sandow to forge ahead with their plan.

The match was for one fall, with a one-hour time limit, and we almost went the full distance. The idea was to make the fans think Marshall, after a furious assault from me, was somehow going to escape with his title. Toward the end of the match,

with Marshall obviously wrestling for a draw, I caught him in an airplane spin, a hold Jim Londos had used as his trademark finisher. Londos had been a very big attraction in St. Louis, so using his old move was suggested as a guaranteed way to get a big response from the fans, which it did. As I began to spin, with Marshall across my shoulders, I bumped into the ropes and lost my balance, dumping him over the top rope to the floor. The rules said Marshall had a 20-count from the referee to get back into the ring, but he had landed heavily at the foot of the press table and appeared groggy, and he didn't make it back in time.

It was an old finish, an effective one if not done too often, and the fans loved it. I was declared the winner and new heavyweight champion, and Marshall was able to claim he had been robbed, which set up the mandatory rematch a couple of weeks down the road, something we almost always did in switching the title. Sandow, who was unpopular with the fans from his days with Ed Lewis, did his part, too, hitting the ring

immediately after the referee's decision was announced and throwing a fit. The crowd loved it, especially when the referee grabbed the ring microphone and insisted his decision stood. A number of fans spontaneously rushed the ring and lifted me to their shoulders.[22]

I was 21 years old, the youngest man to ever hold the world heavyweight wrestling championship, and the publicity about my victory couldn't have been better. It was the lead story in the sports sections of all three local dailies the next day, and there were lots of follow-up stories and photos in the days that followed. The wire services spread the word, too, and Packs' telephone began to ring off the hook almost immediately as other promoters called, begging for my services. Wrestling was looking for a hot attraction, and it looked like I was it.

The future looked absolutely golden, but it all evaporated in a matter of days. My title reign lasted only six weeks, all because Packs and

Sandow made me an offer I had to refuse. They called me to their office and stuck a management contract under my nose. The deal called for them to handle my bookings — for which they would receive a fee, paid by the promoter who used me — and would pay me five percent of the net from each appearance. I almost laughed when I looked at the document. A five-percent fee was bad enough, but that didn't bother me as much as the fact it was based on the net. I had been around long enough to know promoters would deduct last year's rent, promotional fees, laundry, and whatever else their devious brains could conjure from the gross. Whatever was left — the net — went to pay the boys, and it was almost never what it should have been. The only way to negotiate with a promoter was to get a guarantee plus travel expenses and the "right of privilege" to a percentage of the gate if the gross hit a certain level.

I hesitated, saying I wanted to think it over, and they said okay. As soon as I left Packs' office, I

looked up Ray Steele and showed him their offer.

Ray read through the contract a couple of times without comment. "Kid," he finally said, "they'll rob you blind if you sign this thing. You can make more money negotiating for yourself."

So I went back to Packs and Sandow and told them I couldn't sign. They could handle my bookings, I said, for the usual fee promoters collected from other promoters, but I would negotiate my fee for myself. Neither man reacted. They didn't change their offer or try to persuade me to change my mind. They just nodded and waved goodbye.

I wrestled a handful of dates in January 1938 as champion and did fine in terms of money, negotiating for myself. Late that month, however, I was wrestling in a tournament and my opponent kicked me, hard, under the right ear. The result was a mastoid infection, and cellulitis set in, something that killed people in those days before

antibiotics. As soon as I got back to St. Louis, I checked myself into Barnes Hospital, where the doctors immediately stuck me in a bed and treated me with sulfanilamide, the only effective drug they had against internal infections.

The sulfanilamide did the job, but it had nasty side effects — hallucinations, almost constant dizziness, and loss of appetite. I could only lie in my bed, watching weird creatures popping out of the wall and generally feeling miserable.

One morning, the booking office called and said they had an especially lucrative date for me in Boston. It was set for February 11, only two days away, and I would have to leave immediately if I was to get there in time. "Can you make it?" they asked.

I talked with the doctors without telling them what I had in mind, and they said I could be discharged if I promised to take it easy. I called the booking office back, and within an hour, the

promotion's publicity man, Sam Muchnick, showed up to help sign me out of the hospital. Sam took me straight to Union Station and bought us tickets on the first train to Boston.

Sam was to become a very important figure later in my career, but he was only a messenger on this particular trip, and I imagine he wasn't very happy about it because he had been ordered to do what neither Packs nor Sandow had the guts to do. As soon as we had settled into our compartment, Sam told me the news: I was to lose the title in Boston to a guy named Steve "Crusher" Casey. The Boston promoter, Paul Bowser, was a very wealthy man. He had done such good business with Casey that he had called Packs and Sandow with an offer for the title that involved so much money they simply had to say "yes." At least, that's what Sam had been instructed to tell me. For all I know, maybe that's exactly what happened. I couldn't help suspecting, however, that Packs and Sandow had decided to shop the title around because they were so unhappy about the contract

I'd refused to sign, and Bowser had been the high bidder.[23] I physically couldn't do anything about it, either, and frankly, at that point, I really didn't care. What I needed most was a long rest. I figured losing the title was better than worrying about a double-cross somewhere down the road by someone who could take advantage of my poor condition, so I just shrugged off the news and said okay. I slept all the way to Boston.

In our match, Casey ran over me like a freight train, which was unnecessary, so I looked him up in his dressing room afterwards. He was surrounded by sportswriters when I walked in, so I made it appear I had come over in a gesture of good sportsmanship to congratulate the new champion. Once the writers had cleared out, though, I came straight to the point. "You've got one coming, Casey, and I'm not going to forget," I told him. "Somewhere down the road, I'll square the account. I could overlook what you did to me, but not what you gave the fans. When it happens, I want you to remember you could have avoided it."

Casey and I wrestled together two or three times that year, and it was like nothing had happened between us. Almost two years after that match in the Boston Garden, though, I got him, in Montreal. It was a performance all the way, but I put some lumps on him I hope didn't heal quickly. Even the fans could see Casey was absorbing a genuine beating. Ed Lewis, who was the special referee in the match, came back to my dressing room afterwards and asked me what the hell had been going on. "Revenge, pure and simple," I told him. "You heard about the title change in Boston two years ago?"

Of course he had. Everybody had heard about it. Ed smiled and patted me on the shoulder. I had taken a page from his own book, and he understood perfectly.

Casey was like a puppy dog around me after our Montreal match, and we had several opportunities over the years to rehash things. One conversation in particular stood out, however, and I decided as

a result he wasn't a very bright guy. I had told him the whole thing began when I refused to sign a five-percent contract with Packs and Sandow. "You shoulda signed," he said, laughing at me. "That's exactly what I signed for, and I made $13,000 that year."

"Is that right?" I said. "Well, I'm not saying this to be boastful, Casey, but I made $18,000 — without the title. Maybe that tells you something."

I was tempted to tell him the rest of the story, just to rub it in — that I'd earned the $18,000 despite being ostracized for several months. Packs saw to it my bookings were few and far between after the Casey match, and I had to work my way back up the ladder to where I had been in late 1937. It would have been an especially tough period for me if I hadn't had people like Ray Steele, George Zaharias, and Ed Lewis looking out for me, helping me get bookings and seeing to it I was paid what I was worth. All things considered, though, I never regretted not signing that contract. It wasn't about

the title. It was about thrilling the fans and being properly paid for it.

Endnotes, Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Tom Packs stayed mad at me for the better part of 1938, but his own hunger to make a buck finally brought an end to it. He couldn't help noticing during that period when he was punishing me that I was still drawing good money wherever I appeared, especially in St. Louis. Then and now, the ability to draw money was the absolute bottom line, so it came as no surprise to me early in 1939 when he called me into his office and announced he was ready to put the world heavyweight title belt on me again.

This time there was no talk about a five-percent contract. Business was still an up-and-down thing

around the country, and only a handful of us were consistently drawing money at the box office. Packs, always the businessman, obviously decided it was better to have me putting paying customers in his seats than suffering his wrath. Once he agreed to let me handle my own negotiations with the promoters, I was only too happy to reclaim the title.

The switch took place on February 24 in St. Louis, and my opponent was a familiar face, Everette Marshall. He had "won" the title from Steve Casey a couple of months earlier without even climbing into the ring; Casey had simply left the country. I honestly don't know why, although I suspect he probably he was probably trying to avoid a title switch or a double-cross — and several top promoters got together and declared he had vacated the title. Instead of having a tournament or something like that to name a new champion, the promoters simply gave the belt to Marshall, which really meant Packs was once again in control of the title.

Packs' decision to put the belt back on me paid off immediately, for both of us. The card where we switched it was a charity show to raise money for the Shriners, and it attracted a paying crowd of 12,100 people, one of the best wrestling houses in the country in years. That caught the eye of other promoters, so Packs put me on the road again. He had split with Billy Sandow by then, so the percentage he got for booking me — usually three percent of the gross — was all his. I was doing pretty well myself, demanding and getting as much as 10 percent wherever I appeared.

It was not too long after the switch that Packs got a call from promoter Tony Stecher in Minneapolis. I was a hot card around the country, but Tony had an even hotter one and was interested in making him the champion. Would I be willing, Tony asked Packs and me, to pass the title to Bronko Nagurski?

My answer was yes. Tony was a man of integrity and had been very kind to me when I was

breaking into pro wrestling, so I had a lot of respect for him. Essentially, he was asking me for a favor, and I was pleased that I could do it for him. I also knew putting the title on Bronko could only help all concerned because he was so well-known. He had been an enormous name as a college football player, an All-American at the University of Minnesota as both a fullback and a tackle — in the same year, by the way — and had starred in the pros with the Chicago Bears. In fact, in a very minor way, I was responsible for "rescuing" him from the Bears and getting him into pro wrestling on a full-time basis.

I was at the train station in Chicago, en route to a booking in Minneapolis, and had stopped into the restaurant there for breakfast. As I sat there, I noticed a big guy at a nearby table obviously trying to catch my eye. I wasn't a football fan, but I had read enough sports pages over the years that I easily recognized him from his photos. It was Bronko Nagurski. He came over to the table, introduced himself, and invited me to have

breakfast with him.

We visited for a couple of very pleasant hours and all Bronko wanted to talk about was wrestling. He had played several seasons with the Bears by then and was very unhappy with his contract. The owner and coach, George Halas, was a notorious skinflint and was paying his star only $5,000 a year. Halas is a revered name among fans of pro football, of course, but after hearing some of Bronko's stories about how he treated his players while looking after his own interests, I decided the man should have been a wrestling promoter. Bronko was anxious to make better money and, beginning in 1933, had tried a little wrestling during the off-season to augment his income. He had seen enough to begin wondering if he couldn't do better as a wrestler, and that's why he was interested in picking my brain.

I told him a little bit about the kind of money people like Ed Lewis and Jim Londos had made, but I explained they were exceptions, that most of

the boys were lucky to make as much as he did playing football, and that we were responsible for our own expenses, as well. That should have discouraged him, but then I went on to explain that if he was lucky and smart about dealing with promoters, he could make a good living. "Besides," I told him, "you've already got a leg up because you're a big name in the sports pages, which could translate into dollars in the wrestling business, the same way it did for Wayne 'Big' Munn and Gus Sonnenberg."

He was actually impressed with how well I was doing and ended the conversation by asking me if I had any advice for him. "Well, I'd look up Tony Stecher in Minneapolis if I were you," I said. "He's a good promoter and would know how to handle you."

Bronko had already decided that much for himself and had contacted Tony about working a full-time schedule — it was Tony who had used him as a part-time performer beginning in 1933

and had even put his version of the world heavyweight title on him — but I guess our conversation pushed him over the line. He quit the Bears after the 1937 season and headed for Minneapolis, where Tony immediately pushed him straight to the top of his cards. Fan reaction was tremendous, and in practically no time at all, every promoter in the country was begging for Bronko's services.

Once Packs and I agreed to switch the title, all that remained was to set the date and location of the match. Packs, who got a nice chunk of cash from Tony Stecher for the title, called around the country to see what various promoters were willing to bid, and the winner was Morris Sigel, a good promoter who had built Houston into a good wrestling town. Sigel paid Packs a larger-than-usual booking fee and set the match for June 23, 1939.

What happened that night wasn't actually Bronko's fault. He was a very limited performer

in the ring, then and later, simply a football star getting by on his name and little else. Why Tony Stecher never arranged for him to get any serious coaching is a mystery to me, but it was obvious he didn't. It was especially obvious at that point in his career. Bronko, despite six years as a pro wrestler, clearly had no idea about how to properly perform a match. Sigel's house that night, at the almost-new Houston Coliseum, was in excess of 9,000 people. That was a very big turnout for that town, and since a good match would help him down the line, he was relying on me to provide it. It was up to me to make the match exciting and worthy of the world title, and that's why I got hurt.

The match was two out of three falls. I would take the first one and Bronko would take the other two. I had to work hard to make it a thrilling match because Bronko was so green, but everything unfolded well, right up to the finish of the second fall. That's when Bronko hit me with his only move of any real consequence — a flying

tackle.

I sailed over the ropes, fell to the floor, and then lay there for a few moments to convince myself I wasn't hurt. Frankly, I couldn't tell. What had happened was, as I was going over the ropes, I put so much momentum into it that I lost control and, instead of coming down on my feet, I came down on my hands and knees, a nine-foot drop to the concrete floor. The impact fractured my left kneecap.

Bronko could see that I was genuinely hurt when I crawled back under the ropes, so he pinned me immediately. I hobbled back to the dressing room after the pin and promptly packed the knee in ice. If there had been a lot of pain, I wouldn't have gone back out for the third fall, but my entire leg was numb, so I decided I could go. I limped back out at the bell, but I was barely mobile by then. Bronko pinned me after only a few minutes, and now my world title was his. By the time the referee was raising his hand, pain had replaced the

numbness, and the fans had absolutely no doubt that I was seriously injured.

That one disastrous fall put me on the shelf for a long time,[24] and would have a long-term result. My knee was still tender when I resumed my wrestling workouts — it would stay that way for five years — so I had to revise some of my moves in order for the right leg to take most of the stress. Since I was naturally ambidextrous, it wasn't all that difficult to adjust, but I paid the price many years later when I had to have the right hip joint replaced. I had favored my right hip for so long that the joint was like a burnt-out bearing in a car. The only good news, according to my surgeon, is that both of my hips probably would have ended up that way if I hadn't adjusted to the knee injury. A lot of wrestlers and other athletes who stayed competitive for a long time ended up with artificial joints in both hips.

I had driven to Houston in my own car for the match with Nagurski, and it was easy to see I

wouldn't be driving back. By the time I cleared out of the dressing room that night, my knee was so swollen and painful that I couldn't get under the steering wheel. Sam Muchnick had made the trip with me, though, so I climbed into the back seat and stretched out my leg while Sam handled the driving, non-stop to St. Louis.

Sam had been a top baseball writer before joining Tom Packs' office and he knew a lot of important people in the game. As soon as we hit town, he drove straight to one of them, Dr. Bob Hyland, a prominent orthopedic surgeon who'd been dubbed the "Surgeon General of baseball." He handled all the serious medical injuries incurred by the St. Louis Cardinals, the St. Louis Browns, and several other major league clubs. Hyland diagnosed a crowfoot fracture of my left patella and immediately immobilized it so I couldn't bend the knee. Then he gave me the bad news: if the knee wasn't immobilized, the patella fracture could very easily open into a break. "You can forget about wrestling for a long, long while,"

he said. "It's going to take at least a couple of months for that fracture to knit, and it's going to be several more months before you can even move comfortably. You can't sit around and wait for it to happen, either, because your leg muscles are going to atrophy in a hurry, so I'd suggest you start walking immediately, no matter how much it hurts."

It was "Mother Nature's cure," Hyland said. "The sooner you use an injured member, the sooner you'll heal," he explained. Walking would stimulate circulation of the blood, which carries oxygen to an injury. He also gave me a small rubber mallet with which I was supposed to gently tap the knee several times a day, sort of like sending a wakeup call to my system.

Tapping the knee was damned uncomfortable, but it worked. So did the walking, which I took care of mainly by playing golf. I played at least 18 holes almost every day, sometimes with George Zaharias and his wife, Babe, and sometimes with

Joe Medwick, a ballplayer with the Cardinals who was so proficient, he hustled other golfers to supplement his baseball income. If no one was around, I'd grab my sticks and shoot a round by myself, just to get in my walking.

Recuperating from a major injury could be a scary experience for a pro wrestler. We were independent contractors, solely responsible for ourselves, and since we had no union, we had no medical benefits. The promoters couldn't have been less sympathetic, either. Well, kid, they'd say, come back when you can wrestle and maybe I can use you. (One promoter actually did start a sort of insurance fund for injured wrestlers, withholding a small percentage — one percent, I believe — of everyone's payoffs to pay for it, but no one ever saw more than a handful of dollars. It was just another scam to line the promoter's pockets.)

I was actually more fortunate that most wrestlers. I was riding high in 1939. I was at the

very top of the business and I was commanding top dollar. I had been saving a little from almost every payoff for almost two years, ever since my stint with Joe Malcewicz in the San Francisco territory, so I had a nice fat savings account at the time I fractured my knee. I had also built a large duplex on 10 acres of land outside of St. Louis and paid it off. All things considered, I could have sat at home for a couple of years without worrying about money.

That wasn't what I did, though. Frankly, I'd gotten a little disillusioned with the wrestling business and had been looking around for something else to do for some time. It seemed like someone was always sticking a business opportunity under my nose in those days. In 1936, for instance, during my full first year in pro wrestling, I became close to a German brewmaster in Evansville, Indiana, named Adam Fink who wanted to teach me his trade and eventually turn over his business to me. I loved wrestling, but I thought pretty heavily about his offer for quite a

while before turning it down. At the same time, though, I resolved that I wouldn't let my ambitions as a wrestler stand in the way of other good opportunities that might come along.

So what did I do during the summer of 1939 besides play a lot of golf? I became a chicken farmer, that's what. A lot of people laughed when I told them what I was doing, but I'd seen that there was a lot of money to be made in that business. I had the room, the time, and the money, so I figured I'd try it, just to see what it was like. In practically no time at all, I was selling 100 broilers a week, and the demand was such that I was thinking about expanding even further.

Once I'd satisfied myself that I had a handle on the business, though, I shut it down. I had kept my books very carefully and seen that while I could make a good living at raising chickens, I could make a lot more wrestling. I was only 23 years old, a very young age to have had the success I'd had, and I could see a lot of productive years

ahead of me. I decided to give wrestling another shot, until I was 35 or so, save my money, and then retire to something less strenuous.

World War II changed my plans, just like it changed everyone else's. In my case, however, it was altered in a way I never could have anticipated by an innocent impulse during that summer of 1939: I bought a dog.

Charlie Rentrop, the promoter in Memphis, raised Doberman Pinschers, absolutely beautiful dogs, and I decided I'd like to have one. I gave him $75 for a pup named Meon, who wasn't much of a specimen in terms of conformation. He was an especially smart animal, though, and since I had plenty of time to work with him, I ended up with a very good obedience dog.

We became great companions, and when I was able to return to wrestling in early 1940, I began taking Meon with me on the road, especially when I drove west overnight to dates in places like

Kansas and Colorado, where jackrabbits were abundant. He was so quick that he could actually run one down, and that's how I kept him exercised. He would awaken at daybreak and begin watching. If he spotted a jackrabbit, I'd slow the car, roll down the window, and out he would go. When I blew the horn, back he would come. Keeping his nails trimmed was no problem, either. If I was on a straight stretch of highway where I could see there were no other cars, I'd let him run beside the car on the asphalt for awhile.

He was a healthy, well-conditioned dog, and he was incredibly strong. Once, while I was driving to Denver, I had Ray Steele along for company. It was a boring trip across the plains, so Ray crawled into the backseat with Meon to take a nap. Pretty soon I heard a thump, and then Ray began laughing.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"This damn dog won't let me sleep," Ray said,

who was crawling off the floorboard. "Watch this."

Meon had positioned himself against the rear cushion. Ray, who weighed a solid 210 pounds, stretched out next to him, and Meon started slowly pushing him with his paws. Ray was resisting him with everything he had, but slowly, inch by inch, Meon was pushing him off that seat. Finally, Ray hit the floor again.

"That's incredible," said Ray, shaking his head. "I can handle the toughest wrestlers in the business, but I can't outwrestle a seventy-five-pound dog."

I was never one to do anything halfway, so I decided to try my hand at entering Meon in dog shows, usually in the novice class, just to see how we'd do. He was a winner almost everywhere I showed him, and in 1940, he was the highest-scoring obedience dog in the United States.

He repeated in 1941, and we became a popular attraction on some of the dog-show circuit training sessions with a little exhibition we did. I'd drive my car into the center of the arena, put a $100 bill on the seat, and then walk off, leaving Meon alone in the car. Anyone who could get that bill off the seat without getting bitten was welcome to it. A lot of people tried, but no one ever got it.

I was a little more prepared for World War II than most Americans, I guess, because I wrestled in Canada during 1941, including a couple of benefits in Montreal for the war effort — the Canadians were in the war long before we were — and what I saw convinced me we'd end up getting involved, too. I wasn't suitable material for the military, however, because of my knee, and I wondered how I could do my part when the time came.

A couple of days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the answer came. I had become a serious breeder of Dobermans by then, and thanks

to Meon, I was a familiar face to the top people in the American Kennel Club. The AKC had been tapped by the government to help oversee the Dogs for Defense program, which involved recruiting and training guard dogs for defense installations, and since those were the very sort of dogs I knew something about, they wanted me involved. I accepted an appointment as head recruiter in Louisiana and south Texas, for the sum of one dollar a year and moved to Houston.

Not only was Houston the headquarters for the regional Dogs for Defense program, it also was the booking office for the Texas wrestling circuit — Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio and Galveston — so it was perfect for me. No one expected my dollar-a-year salary to stretch very far, so it was perfectly okay with my employers if I augmented my income through wrestling. And that's exactly what I did for the next two years. During the day, I inducted dogs; at night, I hit the road as a wrestler.[25]

"Dogs for Defense" was one of the early public-relations successes of the home front, and it was extremely interesting to be involved in it. We literally recruited people's pets for training as guard dogs, doing shows with trained dogs at schools and businesses to publicize the program, and a lot of people responded. To qualify, a dog had to weigh more than 50 pounds, be under five years of age, and free of filaria (heartworm). When we found a dog that met the basic criteria, we'd test it to see if it was aggressive and would fight. Those that passed were trained as guard dogs and shipped off to K-9 training areas, mostly in California and Virginia.

One of the defense plants where we placed dogs was the Todd Houston Shipyard, a major shipbuilder that employed 20,000 people. I met some of the brass there through one of our exhibitions, and they obviously liked me enough to begin recruiting me. They offered a class in acetylene metal cutting that interested me, so I signed up, just to see what it was like. I did so

well at it that the company hired me as an instructor. Six months later, I was the superintendent of the plant's graveyard metal-cutting shift and responsible for 1,200 employees.

By 1943, I was busier than I had ever been, what with the wrestling, the dogs, and the shipyard, and I had an active social life, too. The shipyard was paying a decent salary for those days, but it was peanuts compared to what I was making wrestling, so life was pretty sweet.

Another one of those business opportunities that were always being dangled in front of me also appeared at about that time in the person of Arthur Stout, the president of the shipyard. He was a wrestling fan and had seen me wrestle in New York, and we liked each other's company. He invited me to a lot of important social functions around the city, and I was only too happy to accept, largely because I had begun to get bored in my marriage.

I had played it straight with Evelyn from the very beginning, ignoring the female distractions that were always available to a wrestler on the road. Eight years later, though, we'd literally begun to drift away from each other. She was a very nice girl who was happiest being a German hausfrau, and that's where she wanted me — at home. I was happiest on the road, however, carousing with the boys or socializing with the successful people who are attracted to celebrities. That's what I was, a celebrity athlete, and the allure of what was available became almost irresistible. It's like I woke up one day to the temptation and said, "Wow, how long has this been going on?"

Arthur Stout was inviting us to a lot of social functions in Houston, but Evelyn was uncomfortable with that scene and said so. I wasn't, of course, being ambitious and fascinated by these people, so I often attended by myself. It became obvious to Evelyn and me both that our marriage was headed for the rocks. Finally, one

night, Stout inadvertently forced the issue when he came right out and invited me to come with him to New York after the war and become a part of his company. "You can get out of this wrestling business and quit taking all this abuse," he said.

Well, Stout was like a lot of people who couldn't understand that mostt of us really loved wrestling and were proud of our profession. It was no different than any other career if you cared about it — you worked hard because you had pride, and you tried to do it better than the rest of the guys. If it had really come down to a yes or no, I suspect I wouldn't have gone with him. It became a moot point, though, because I decided I had to get out of my marriage before giving him an answer, and the fallout from that decision eliminated the need for a decision about the other.

Evelyn and I could have saved each other a lot of hurt if we hadn't been so stubborn. She was German, and I was German-Hungarian, which meant neither of us gave up easily, and we could

never see eye to eye about our future. She wanted the vine-covered cottage, while I wanted the bright lights. Her father owned a newspaper distribution business in St. Louis and had done very well with it. He offered to turn it over to me and Evelyn pushed me to do it. She, like Pop had done, kept thinking I would tire of the wrestling game and get "a real job," as she put it time and again. Finally, we had one argument too many over the issue, and we gave up. Honestly, I felt very badly about seeking a divorce, but Evelyn wouldn't divorce me, so I was the one who filed. Her father drove down from St. Louis and picked her up. That was the last time we ever saw each other.

Suddenly, I was as footloose and fancy-free a bachelor as there ever was, and I spread my wings. I was a single, 28-year-old celebrity with plenty of money, a nice house with a great cook and a housekeeper, and four or five women's keys in my pocket. Life was spectacularly great!

And I messed it up, almost immediately.

About 8,000 of the 20,000 employees at the shipyard were women, and maybe 10 of them were what a predatory male, like myself, would call especially attractive. One day, while I was seated in the lunchroom, in walked a woman who was far and away the classiest of the entire bunch, and I decided I had to have her. I really flipped.

Her name was Fredda Huddleston Winter, a shapely, dark-haired beauty from Abilene, Texas. Fredda had been a model at Neiman-Marcus. She was 17 years old and, like me, about to be divorced. I quickly found out that she worked in the ship fitter's office. That was perfect for me because I was in and out of that office every day, checking blueprints, so I started looking for her when I dropped in. She was one of the most alluring women I had ever seen. Several of the big-shot executives at the plant were pitching for her, too, but they were no competition for me. I was a famous athlete with a strong line of razzle dazzle. I just did my act and blew them out of the water. She was swept off her feet, so I returned

the keys that several females had given me and turned all my attention to Fredda.

What a mistake. I should have learned from my first marriage how important it was to live with a woman for a while before making up your mind about her, but I didn't do that. We were both so smitten that we weren't thinking clearly. We were talking marriage before the ink was barely dry on my divorce papers. And that's what we did, late that summer.

It was the worst investment of my life. At one point in my career, I could have written a check for half-a-million dollars without a second thought, but it all went down the drain. We were married for more than 30 years, and the only thing I can say now is I'm sorry she ever walked into that lunchroom. I'm sure she feels the same way because it ended in disaster for both of us.

Actually, it was the U.S. mail more than anything that finally pushed us past the point of common

sense and sent us running for a minister. One day late in the summer of 1944, I received a letter from the President of the United States, and I almost went into shock when I saw it. I opened it with an uneasy feeling, and sure enough, there was that feared salutation so many American males received during the war: "Greetings." It was my draft notice.

I couldn't believe it. In spite of my bad knee and three deferments — in addition to the Dogs for Defense program and the shipyard work, I was exempted because I regularly wrestled on fund-raisers for the War Bonds program — the U.S. Army had decided it simply had to have me. I was absolutely stunned. I made a couple of calls to my draft board in St. Louis and learned that, no, there was no mistake; I had two weeks to report to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio for induction.

Obviously, I concluded, some political pressure had been applied, so I called around some more, piecing things together. It wasn't long before I

figured it out: Evelyn's attorney had influence with the draft board and he persuaded them to change my status to 1-A. Her parents were probably involved, too. They had all but begged us to stay together, and they'd even dangled money in front of me as an inducement to change my mind. That had offended me and made me all the more determined to get a divorce — and, in the end, it also made them angrier with me.

I honestly hadn't suspected that anyone could be so bitter that they would pull strings to do something like having someone drafted into the Army, but that's the only explanation I could come up with to explain what happened. Later, I heard through the grapevine that I was right, that they were "doing this for my own good," that they believed maybe the Army would bring me to my senses and I'd eventually come home — if I didn't get my ass shot off first — and settle down with Evelyn for good. Incredible!

Well, the people at the shipyard and Dogs for

Defense used their political juice, which was considerable in each case, but even they couldn't help me. Someone in St. Louis was determined to see me in the Army — for my own good, of course — and deferment or not, I was going. I couldn't do a thing about it, either, except think about that old saying:

"Heav'n has no rage, like love to hatred turn'd,

Nor Hell a fury, like a woman scorned."

Amen to that, brother.

Endnotes, Chapter 7

Chapter 8

The Army clutched me to its bosom for almost two years, from January 1945 until well into 1946, and I have to say the experience was altogether beneficial. It taught me just how much better life

was on the outside. Never again did I get bored with wrestling or lose my appreciation for what it meant to me.

It's a shame we did away with the draft. I wasn't happy about going, of course, but the experience gave me an up-close look at my fellow Americans that I wouldn't have had otherwise, and what I saw sobered me pretty quickly. It was an eye-opener that a lot of people would benefit from today because it would dispel some of the pretty fantasies about who we really are. The population of this country is a little scary if you look at it too closely.

In my case, I did meet a lot of normal, hard-working, middle-class guys, but not as many as I would have thought. Maybe the Army had already skimmed the cream of the able-bodied male society by 1944 because the rest of what I encountered were illiterates, incompetents, and social misfits, people who didn't have a clue about what was happening around them. The worst ones

— and there was an alarming number of them — were the guys who didn't believe in personal hygiene. They would take a shower only when their body odor got so bad those of us who lived around them would have to threaten them with physical harm. I couldn't believe these people had come off the same streets that I had, but there they were.

Of course, the Army itself was a source of amazement, too. I reported to the reception center in San Antonio, fully expecting to get assigned to the Corps of Engineers, where my experience at the Todd Houston Shipyard would be useful. The Army took one look at me and then looked at its quota list, seeing what it needed at the moment … and decided I looked healthy enough to carry a litter. I was assigned to the medics.

I was shipped to Fort Lewis, Washington, for basic training and medic school. There, fate intervened. One morning, as we stood in formation, a one-star general was trooping the line,

inspecting us. He looked me up and down, moved on to the next man, stopped, and then stepped in front of me again. "Are you by any chance a wrestler?" he asked me.

"Yes, sir," I answered. "And that's what I wish I was doing now, sir."

He laughed and said he was sure he had seen me wrestle once in Washington, D.C., before the war. We chatted for a minute or so about wrestling — he was a big fan, it turned out — and then he went on his way.

I thought nothing of the incident until later in the day when I was ordered to report immediately to the company commander's office. I instinctively figured it meant I was in serious trouble. I had been wrestling in Portland and Tacoma while going through training, something strictly forbidden, and I figured the Army had learned about it. Maybe the general himself had seen me on one of those cards and didn't know I was a

soldier until he had seen me in formation that morning.

However, it wasn't like that at all. The general had merely suggested to the company commander that maybe I could help teach the hand-to-hand combat course, and the company commander had taken the suggestion to be an order. I was no longer a medic-in-training, said the captain; I was a hand-to-hand combat instructor.

And that's how I did my part during the remaining days of World War II. I was transferred to Fort Lewis North Fort, a small training site nearer Tacoma, where I taught eight one-hour classes daily in hand-to-hand combat, straight from the Army manual.

It was absolute nonsense, too. To begin with, it made no sense teaching hand-to-hand to a bunch of medics. How the hell was someone supposed to get involved in hand-to-hand combat while carrying a litter? The Red Cross insignia on a

medic's back was like a crosshair, too, and that's how a lot of them came to be shot during the war. I seriously doubt any of them ever had a chance to use what we taught them. Frankly, the training time would have been better spent teaching them how to pick up a rock and throw it accurately.

I had to wonder, too, about the safety of anyone who actually did have to rely on their training. Whoever wrote the Army's training manual was fantasizing about how easy it was to break an enemy's arm or leg. It read like something written by someone who picked it all up from watching movies — or today's TV wrestling. The lieutenant in charge of the training program eventually decided I probably knew a bit more than the Army about how to hurt someone with my hands, so he simply turned the program over to me and stayed out of my way.

If it hadn't been for Dr. John J. Bonica, I would have ended up overseas in 1945, helping clean up the A-bomb mess in Hiroshima. That's where

most of my unit went, but I was redlined just before we were supposed to ship out. I had ruptured a cartilage in my left knee — the one I fractured in 1939 wrestling Bronko Nagurski — while wrestling one night in Tacoma. Then I had screwed it up worse a couple of days later while running an obstacle course. My company commander ordered me to the infirmary, where the doctors took one look at my knee and ordered me into the hospital.

Dr. Bonica was the chief of anesthesiology at the hospital and at four other Army medical facilities in the Northwest, a young superstar in his field. He was destined to become one of the world's preeminent authorities on the management of pain and the author of the definitive textbooks on anesthesiology. I knew him, though, as a professional wrestler. He had paid his way through medical school by wrestling in carnivals. When he heard I was stationed at Fort Lewis, he tracked me down and introduced himself. Water seeks its own level, and so do

cauliflower ears. I am immensely proud to say that, until the day of his death, we were very dear friends.

Naturally, when Dr. Bonica learned I was in one of his hospitals, he looked in on me. He was interested in seeing to it that I got good medical care, so he asked one of his friends, the top orthopedic surgeon at the hospital, to handle my case. The guy examined me and spotted the earlier injury. "Jesus, you shouldn't even be in the Army with a knee like that," he exclaimed. "I can't understand how you came to be inducted."

I didn't bother him with the ugly details. All I wanted to know was whether he could get me a medical discharge. No, he said, because it was a pre-existing condition, and the Army doesn't like to admit its mistakes. He added, however, that I certainly wasn't fit for duty. My knee needed at least two solid months of rest and rehabilitation. He stuck me in one of the recovery wards and ordered me to stay put.

I stayed the two months, a period made significantly more tolerable by an especially attentive night nurse who happened to be a wrestling fan. Dr. Bonica released me from the hospital with an evaluation that effectively ended my active duty with the Army. It wasn't my discharge — that didn't come until 1946 — but it was the next best thing. The Army had phased out the hand-to-hand combat course by then, so I had nothing to do except stay out of people's way and wait for my papers. Passes were easy to get, so I simply resumed my wrestling career, accepting dates all over the country.

What I found as I made those dates was an audience hungry for wrestling. World War II had snapped up a lot of the talent, but the industry had struggled along during those years in much the same way major league baseball stayed alive, relying mainly on older guys past the age of military service or young kids passed over by the draft. As far as the world title was concerned, a lot had happened. Bronko Nagurski had lost it in

1940 to my dear friend Ray Steele, who held it for a year before losing it back to Bronko. A handsome Hungarian immigrant named Sandor Szabo, who was to become a close friend of mine in California during the early 1950s, wore it for a little while in 1942, followed in rapid succession by a series of people — "Wild" Bill Longson, a former fighter out of Salt Lake City; Yvon Robert, a good-looking French-Canadian performer who was an enormous star in Montreal and Toronto; and Bobby Managoff, another close friend and a second-generation wrestler. (Bobby's real name was Manoogian. His father, also named Bob, was an Armenian immigrant who was one of the original "Terrible Turks" that seemed to proliferate in the wrestling business during the early 1900s. He was a top hand, too, good enough to tour the country for a time with Frank Gotch, wrestling exhibitions against the champ. He also had a daughter who became famous in the 1940s, Kay Armen, who sang with the big bands and was a popular radio star.)

Virtually all of the wrestling action in the United States during World War II was centered in St. Louis, and Tom Packs was one of the few promoters who actually did good business. In 1943, after switching the title around several times, he put the belt on Longson again — Bill had become a great card by then as an aggressive, rough performer — and receipts were so good he decided he would leave the belt there until the war was over. [26]

By my discharge in 1946, Packs was having financial problems that had nothing to do with the wrestling business. He had invested heavily in the stock market, something he knew very little about, and like anyone who plays someone else's game, he was losing his shirt. By then I knew my future was in wrestling, so in early 1947, I approached Packs about buying him out of his promotion.

Packs was more than happy to sell, but he wanted to keep a piece of the operation. I couldn't agree to that, though, because I knew Packs pretty

well by then and figured he would simply hang around on the periphery long enough to get back on his feet and then try to ace me out of the company. Finally, when Packs understood that I wasn't going to accept his terms, he agreed to sell the entire operation, including the world heavyweight title. His asking price was $360,000, a bargain-basement price by anyone's definition, but Packs had already lost a bundle and was happy to have the money. I didn't have that kind of money myself, but I did have a circle of friends who were happy to invest and become my partners, so we put together an ownership group — myself, Montreal promoter Eddie Quinn, Toronto promoter Frank Tunney, and wrestlers Bill Longson and Bobby Managoff. Since it was my intention to remain active as a wrestler, it wouldn't do to have my ownership of the promotion made public, so we persuaded Packs to remain as the front man for a couple of weeks while my partners and I decided how to handle it. When the sale finally became public, the new owner — on paper, that is — was my father, Martin Thesz, who'd agreed to serve as

the figurehead president.[27]

I saw a lot of promoters get fat and lazy over the years. They ran the same tired matches over and over until things got to a point where the fans could almost predict by the calendar what was coming up. I was determined to avoid that because I had put my savings into the operation and had to succeed with it, so I looked to my partners for help. What I wanted was ideas, not ego strokes, from every match they could remember doing, seeing, or hearing about. There were only a limited number of things one could do in the ring with credibility, and I wanted a storehouse of every single one, with every possible variation, as an investment.

It was an unusual approach to running a wrestling operation, and, at first, my partners were skeptical. In those days, most promoters either handled the creative side themselves or turned over the responsibility to a booker. A committee approach was seen as unworkable because egos

were usually involved — for instance, a wrestler who was allowed to have a hand in the booking would invariably promote himself — and because the trust level in the industry was never high. However, once my partners could see I was serious about my plan, they agreed to give it a try, and the results couldn't have been better. It took the better part of a year to get things moving, but once they did, our business really took off.

I suppose I could get away with claiming I was savvy enough to see what was about to happen in the wrestling business, but that wouldn't be the truth. The fact is, I was so happy to be out of the Army and back in civilian life, I wasn't thinking about much of anything except protecting my investment. Pro wrestling was — and remains today — a cyclical business, and in the mid-1940s, it was long overdue for an upswing. Our long wait was about to end, but none of us had a clue about just how big it would be, that pro wrestling was about to hit undreamed-of heights, thanks almost exclusively to the growth of television and two

performers who had started to catch fire during the war years — Buddy Rogers and Gorgeous George.

Rogers is remembered by fans and performers alike as one of the top all-time stars in the business, but it's probably not common knowledge just how influential he was. A German from New Jersey, whose real name was Herman Rohde, he broke into the business somewhere around 1942 as a hero-type personality, with little more going for him than a good body and natural charisma in the ring — which is actually a pretty good beginning, now that I think about it — and he was a hit almost from the start. He had that indefinable something that fans responded to, he was sharp enough to build upon the abilities he had, and he paid attention to what got a reaction from the fans. Thus evolved, over several years, the "Nature Boy," the prototype of the cocky, strutting, sneering, arrogant, peroxide-blond villain that is almost a tired wrestling cliché today. Rogers invented the character, and I believe he did it better than anyone.

He also was one of the first guys to rely a lot on what we called "flying" moves in the ring — body slams, dropkicks, piledrivers, ricochets off the ropes into his opponent, action moves that are commonplace today. All of those moves were in use before Rogers came along, but they were used sparingly; most of the wrestling prior to Rogers' emergence was done on the mat. Rogers was the first to use flying moves in quantity, staying off the mat, and the style was so popular with the fans that other wrestlers, including me, had to follow his lead.

Buddy couldn't wrestle a lick, but that was beside the point. The guy could really draw the money, especially after his "bad" character developed, and guys who wrestled him almost always could count on a good match. He could make even the flimsiest moves look convincing. He also had a natural feel for his audience. No two crowds are alike, but Rogers seemed to know instinctively, night after night, how to get a reaction. In my book, he was the best

performer our business ever had.

That doesn't mean I liked him, though. I had enormous respect for the performer, but I never trusted the man, and that was a majority opinion within the industry. He was very self-centered and interested only in what was good for Buddy Rogers, and not what was good for pro wrestling. You know the type: the sort of person who insists upon standing front-row-center when the pictures are taken. Even the guys he trained and made money with came to be leery of him. If someone who was wrestling regularly with Rogers became too popular with the fans, and looked like he might overshadow him, Rogers would find a way to hurt him in a match.

He even tried to get cute with me a couple of times. One night, after he pulled a couple of stunts during a match in St. Louis, I told him, "Once more, Rogers, and that's it for you. I'll break an arm or a leg and end your career." He straightened up immediately, and afterwards, was always

sucking up to me, praising me, telling me his troubles, and generally acting like we were great pals, trying to soften me up so I'd drop my guard. I was wise to his act, though, thanks to another wrestler who had once been one of Rogers' running buddies. Rogers, said the guy, had a motto that he liked to quote: "Fuck your friends and be nice to your enemies so your enemies will become your friends, and then you can fuck them, too."

My quarrel with Rogers dated back to a single incident during my Army days, shortly before I was discharged. I was on a two-week furlough and had lined up some wrestling dates in the St. Louis territory. Rogers, who wasn't yet wrestling his rough style, was the top attraction in the territory at the time. We were scheduled to work a main event in Louisville, Kentucky on my first night back. Since I didn't have any transportation, Rogers met me at the train station in St. Louis and I hopped into his car. (Opponents weren't supposed to be seen together in public, but I was wearing my Army uniform and sunglasses, so it seemed safe to

ride with Rogers.)

As we were driving to Louisville, Rogers began talking about what we could expect that night. He was a very hot card, and since I was well-known to fans as a two-time world champion, it looked like a sell-out, a good payoff for both of us. Then he started bitching. "The promoter has even brought in Ed Lewis to referee our match," he said. "Why do we need that fat old bastard? The money they're paying him should be going in our pockets."

I stared at Rogers for a couple of moments before asking him what he had been doing before he broke into pro wrestling. He said he had been a cop in New Jersey. "Let me tell you something, kid," I said. "If it wasn't for Ed Lewis, you'd still be walking a beat. None of us would be making any money at this if he hadn't paved the way. Don't ever talk that way, in front of me or anyone, about the man who's the foundation of our industry. It's disrespectful. What's more, he's a

very dear friend of mine."

Rogers knew he had screwed up, and he tried to recover by insisting he had been kidding, but I didn't buy it. He had said enough to make me uneasy about trusting him.

When we got to Louisville, I sat down with the promoter. The logical progression, since I was still in the Army, would have been for Rogers to win. He was a big draw, and a win over me would have made him even hotter at the box office. If Rogers hadn't made those comments about Ed Lewis, I might have gone along with it. I had learned to live with the success that Rogers had been handed, while so many of us worked hard for the sport we loved. But the knowledge of his contempt for Ed and authentic wrestlers was more than I could tolerate.

I wouldn't let Rogers have the win, and he certainly couldn't beat me, so he had no alternative that night but to go along with whatever I wanted to

do. At least that was some satisfaction for me. We ended up wrestling a one-hour draw, and just to punish him, I really turned on the gas. I talked to him in German throughout the match, telling him to hurry it up, go faster, setting a pace that had him breathing hard before we were halfway through. He was absolutely drained by the end.

Buddy Rogers and I would wrestle many more times in the coming years, always as the main-event attraction, and we made an awful lot of money together. One thing the fans never saw in any of those matches, though, was Buddy Rogers with his hand raised at the end. I never let him have a win, just on principle.[28] Several years ago, Fred Hornby, a longtime wrestling historian, put together a Buddy Rogers record book, and it listed close to fifty Thesz-Rogers matches, every one of them ending in either a draw or a Rogers loss. (What the record book doesn't reveal is whether the matches were any good, but I can tell you that, simply by looking at the results: If the

match was a draw, it was almost always a good match. If I was the winner, however, Rogers wouldn't put any effort into it, cheating the fans of any flair or excitement, and that only served to make me angrier with him than I already was.)

In later years, I realized every industry has its equivalent of Buddy Rogers — someone who reaches the top but never understands the objective. Buddy and I finally made peace a few years before his death in 1992, but it's hard to forget all that happened between us. Life turns on some funny points, and who knows what Rogers' career would have looked like if he hadn't made that crack to me about Ed Lewis.

Gorgeous George was a different matter altogether. I liked the guy a lot and respected him because he could actually wrestle, which is something he didn't show the fans very often once he hit it big. His real name was George Wagner. He was a tough street kid from a rough part of Houston who had learned his wrestling the

old-fashioned way — from the ground up, competing in wrestling exhibitions for spare change and picking up experience as he went along.

I had met him in the Tacoma area during the war while I was stationed at Fort Lewis and wrestling an occasional date. He had been a decent junior-heavyweight, but he wasn't going particularly anywhere in the business. He was just another frustrated young wrestler trying to catch a break. As the war began, he decided that if he was going to survive, he had better find himself a gimmick, so he began calling himself "Gorgeous" George Wagner. Bit by bit, he began putting together the character.

The first thing he did was become a villain, which is an easier role in the long run. A boy could always find work as a rough wrestler, while a clean wrestler had to click with the fans in order to succeed. What the fans liked in one area didn't always work in another, and it wasn't uncommon

for the boys to switch styles as they moved around the territories. It's easier to be hated than loved, and in George's case, he simply found his niche.

By the end of the war he had bleached his hair and pretty much transformed himself. An old boyhood buddy of George's from Houston, a strange, sexual switch-hitter named Sterling "Dizzy" Davis, had become a popular wrestling attraction in Mexico with an effeminate act, wearing flowing robes and tossing gardenias to the crowd. Since Davis was convinced the gimmick would never work in the States, he gave George his permission to use it. Johnny Doyle, one of the promoters in the southern California area, added a few wrinkles, like gold bobby pins and a valet, and Gorgeous George (he dropped "Wagner" altogether) was ready to hit the runway. His timing couldn't have been better.

Pro wrestling was using character performers long before George Wagner became Gorgeous George, and he certainly wasn't the first

flamboyant one — a guy named Lord Lansdowne, in the Ohio territory during the 1930s, was the first to use a valet and long, colorful robes as part of his act — but George was the first to use the effeminate bit, and that's what made him an immediate sensation. Personally, I didn't care for the gimmick. I was a product of an era when authentic wrestling ability is what counted, and that's what I believed in. I also was a businessman, however, and there was no mistaking George's impact. He put paying customers in the seats like no one before him, and that's what counted. We simply adjusted to what George was doing and we all raked in the money.

It was easier for me to accept him because George was a pleasure to wrestle. I respected his ability to draw money, and, as I've already said, he could actually wrestle, so that's what we'd do when we were booked together — a bit of his shtick and a bit of mine. A lot of the gimmick performers who came along in his wake didn't know a wrestling hold from a handshake, and I

always refused to dignify their in-the-ring stuff when I worked with them. They could mince around and play for the cheap crowd reactions all they wanted, but when they finally got around to locking up with me, it was time for school. My "gimmick" was wrestling, and I wasn't about to abandon it for the sake of making those characters look good.

George was different, though, and I was always happy to go along with whatever he wanted to do because I knew he would make the price of the fan's ticket a bargain. He was an absolute master at getting a reaction from a crowd, better than anyone I ever saw, including Buddy Rogers, and it started the moment he began his slow walk down the aisle to the ring, usually to the sounds over the arena's PA system of a scratchy recording of "Pomp and Circumstance." He would always pick out a target in the audience, usually a fat or unattractive woman sitting on the aisle, and stop dead in his tracks when he reached her. He would look her up and down, with obvious distaste, and

then say something like, "God, you're disgusting!" I saw lots of those fans — their husbands and boyfriends, too — come out of their seats and try to hit him. By the time George reached the ring, the fans were usually howling for his scalp.

One night in the 1950s, George and I had a booking in Las Vegas that was typical of how things went when you appeared with him. Las Vegas was always a bad wrestling town because there are so many entertainment opportunities, but we had a good house that night because the main event was Gorgeous George against the world champion. Gypsy Rose Lee, the famous stripper and an absolutely beautiful woman, was working one of the showrooms at the time, and she agreed to make a guest appearance. She came to the ring during the introductions, handed George a rose, and kissed him on the cheek. George accepted it like he was royalty, and he strutted around the ring for awhile, smirking and sneering at the fans, occasionally lifting the rose to his nose and

inhaling its aroma.

After a sufficient pause to let George get his reaction, Rose came over to my corner and planted a long kiss on me, full on the lips. I responded with a clinch worthy of the movies, and Rose really put herself into it, finally pulling away as if she were about to swoon. Well, George went absolutely berserk! He slammed the rose to the canvas and stomped it to smithereens, yelled and ranted, and then rushed at Rose with his hand drawn back, as if he was about to slap her. Naturally, I intervened to protect her, and the match was on. It was a wild crowd, on its feet the entire way, and I give George all the credit — for coming up with the idea, and for creating the heat.

Gorgeous George would have been an enormous star in pro wrestling under any circumstances because he was unique for the times, but it was television, of course, that made him a crossover personality and a household name during the late 1940s and early 1950s. It was purely his great

luck and timing to arrive in Los Angeles at about the same time that promoter Hugh Nichols had accepted a deal from a local television station to broadcast the matches live from the Hollywood Legion Stadium.

Since television is so much a part of everyday life today, it's hard for younger people to believe what a sensational curiosity it was in its earliest days. All over the country, people literally lined up outside department stores at night and stood there on the sidewalks for hours, watching the flickering images on floor models inside the stores' windows. A lot of those people caught George on TV, and he was so outrageous for the times that it wasn't long before everybody was talking about him.

An important boost came from comedian Bob Hope. A lot of Hollywood's big names have always had a place in their affections for pro wrestling, dating back to the days when Ed Lewis was atop the heap and running around with the

likes of actor John Barrymore, so Hope's interest was nothing unprecedented. I came to know a lot of stars myself, including Hope, and it's my guess they liked us because they saw us for what we were — athletic entertainers, which meant we were colleagues.

Hope's radio show, The Bob Hope Show, was one of the hottest shows in America in time, in large part because he kept his humor topical. He had seen George live at the Legion Stadium and on TV, and since he was careful to stay attuned to what people were talking about, he had his gag writers come up with lines about Gorgeous George. The free publicity spread George's name to an even bigger audience, one comprised of a lot of people who knew nothing about pro wrestling, and many of them decided to see for themselves what the live matches were all about. Pretty soon, promoters around the country were begging for George, knowing he would bring out the curious as well as the regulars. By the late 1940s, with Johnny Doyle as his booking agent, George was

demanding and getting 20 percent and more of the gate wherever he appeared, and the gates were almost always huge.

Television did a lot more for pro wrestling, of course, then simply make Gorgeous George a star and a wealthy man. It's impossible, in fact, to overstate the sweep of its impact. Everything about the pro-wrestling industry changed because of television, from the front office to the in-the-ring product. In retrospect, the funny thing about it all is that literally no one at first could sense the power of the medium — which made our business no different than any other, I guess.

Depending upon where you lived during the late 1940s and early 1950s, you likely saw one of two wrestling shows on television — Hugh Nichols' cards from the Hollywood Legion Stadium, or promoter Fred Kohler's matches from Chicago, usually from the Marigold Arena. The networks were such in those days that if you lived south of a line extending due west from the Washington,

D.C. area, you almost certainly got the show from Los Angeles; north of the line, you saw the Chicago product. A lot of wrestling fans initially discovered pro wrestling through the New York promotion's Madison Square Garden telecasts, but that was a little bit later. The point is, there wasn't much competition on the air during those early days of television.

Television loved pro wrestling because it was easy to understand, easily contained, and inexpensive to produce, and as new stations began to pop up around the country, they began producing their own shows through the cooperation of local promoters. (St. Louis was among the first cities outside of Chicago and Los Angeles to go that route; our deal with KSD-TV was signed in 1947.) It was almost the perfect show for those primitive television times — it had action, melodrama, comedy, colorful personalities, and beefcake, and all that was required to broadcast it was an announcer and a single TV camera focused on a 20-by-20 ring.

For once, the thieves were slow to pick up on what they had. They were in the business of producing live matches, not television programs, and that's where they kept their focus. Certainly, no one had any idea in the earliest days of TV of its potential as a marketing tool, which is really its essence. The only thing the promoters knew was that TV stations were putting money in their hands for the rights to either film or air their matches live. Since the promoters were going to stage the matches anyway, why not take the cash? It was like getting double-duty for your product, and no one wanted to fiddle with it and risk ruining a good thing.

The ignorance of TV's potential was most glaring in the area of promotional spots. Unlike today's sleek, high-energy, I'll-kill-the-bum messages, the early promos were nothing more than a wrestler standing ringside with the show's announcer saying "Hello," and "I'm happy to be here," and "Thank you very much." It didn't matter what the wrestler's ring personality or role

was. He was only there to fill time, not to boost his character. He established himself in the ring with his sweat, and not at ringside with his spit.

As a rule, in fact, in the early days, no one even discussed with you beforehand what you ought to say on camera. In some cases, even the wrestling was considered superfluous — the sponsors couldn't care less what we said or what we did in the ring, just so long as their name went out over the air. A few, like the sponsor of one of the shows in Hawaii, went a step further — they insisted on appearing in front of the camera themselves so they could wave to their family and friends.

And it wasn't just the sponsors who were camera-struck. A lot of promoters who got TV shows wanted to appear on camera, too, and their promotional spots were usually devoted to talking about what wonderful people they were. Al Karasick, who promoted Hawaii for a lot of years, had a quirk of his own: he didn't particularly care

what you talked about on camera, just so long as you were sure to say something nice about his daughter. It was crazy! Here we were trying to promote wrestling, and all Karasick wanted to promote was his daughter.

Television killed some careers, too. Some guys who could lift you from your seat with their wrestling would get on camera and freeze. They'd turn into what we called a "stick," a guy who was hard to work with because he was stiff, slow, or not thinking. It was an absolutely awful thing to have happen, especially for the poor guy who'd frozen up because it risked exposing what we were trying to do. We'd call a move and he would hesitate, and then say, "Huh? What?" In time, as wrestling got more sophisticated in its understanding and use of television, the ability of a performer to work in front of the camera became critically important. Some decent talent simply couldn't cut it, and once the importance of wrestling credibly on TV was established, people like that either drifted away from the business or

were kept off camera and low on the ladder at the arenas.

By the mid-1950s, the television networks dropped wrestling from their lineups, primarily because they'd overexposed it and ratings had begun to drop. Another reason, though, is that the technology had improved to the point where lots of other interesting things were becoming possible — compare a tape of a pro football or baseball telecast from the early 1950s with one from today if you want to see what I mean — and the bottom line in television was always the same as it was in wrestling: put on something that will sell to a bigger audience.

That's not to say wrestling itself suffered, however, although that's exactly what a lot of armchair analysts like to believe. By the late 1950s, promoters and wrestlers alike had begun to learn, through trial and error, how to use television for their own purposes. One of the first things they learned was to stop airing their arena matches,

either live or on film, because that was giving away free what they were trying to sell you on buying in their promotional spots: a ticket to the matches.

In practically every major town where there was a wrestling promotion, the promoter became a television producer and found a time slot on a local station for his show. It was actually a better deal for the promoters. It was their wrestlers — not New York's, L.A's, or Chicago's — who were appearing on the air, and they could tailor their promotional spots to support what they were trying to do at the arenas. If you had asked them, they would have told you the very last thing they wanted to see on network television was wrestling ... unless, of course, it was their product.

Well, promoters being promoters, greed soon entered the picture. In 1954, the four major promoters who literally ruled southern California had a nasty falling-out over Hugh Nichols' refusal to share his profits from his TV show. A year or

so earlier, the same thing had happened in Texas when the Houston office declared war on the Dallas promotion, which was raking in big bucks with its own syndicated show, Texas Rasslin'. Every promoter in the country who had a TV show of his own realized he had a powerful weapon to use if he decided to invade another promoter's territory. If he could get his TV program on a station in a rival promoter's hometown, he might be able to attract his audience, which meant he could begin running live matches there himself and possibly take over the territory. In places where there were no more than one or two stations, bidding wars broke out between rival promoters for what amounted to exclusive air rights. Instead of taking the local TV station's money for the rights to air his wrestling, a promoter might give away his product for free, just to keep a rival from getting the spot. Naturally, it was an easy step from that to paying the television stations for air time, and since the TV people were in business to make money, promoters lived with the scary possibility that someone would come

along with a better offer and buy away the time slot.

Today, the bond between television and wrestling is a critical one, at least as far as wrestling is concerned. No one even argues about it anymore. It's accepted as gospel that, without TV, a wrestling promotion cannot succeed. Of course, with the shakeout that hit pro wrestling in the early 1980s and resulted in the death of the regional territories, the question has become: which is more important — television or the arena? Since there are only two promotions of any size still in operation, and both are running their live shows nationally, I'd come down firmly on the side of television. It used to be, as recently as the early 1980s, there was a live wrestling card running somewhere every night of the week and every week of the year. Today, the weekly hometown wrestling card is only a memory in most parts of the country. If you like pro wrestling, you have to watch it on the tube.

Frankly, it's incredible to me when I think about it. Professional wrestling started down that road fifty years ago, and while that's a long span of time in some people's minds, it's almost like the blink of an eye to me. I can't believe it's changed so much, and now that pro wrestling has moved into the era of pay-per-views, it's still changing. It's been a wild ride, especially the early part, from the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, and what made it so wild was that no one could see what was coming.

Endnotes, Chapter 8

Chapter 9

St. Louis was like a combat zone when I returned in 1946, and it was all due to Sam Muchnick. My occasional traveling partner from the earlier days with Tom Packs had lined up some wealthy backers shortly before World War II and opened a

wrestling promotion of his own, but he shut it down when the war broke out, figuring correctly there'd barely be enough business for one promotion, and that Packs had deeper pockets. It was just as well, too, because the Army got him in 1942 and he didn't return to St. Louis and the wrestling business until late 1945.

Sam is remembered today by fans and wrestlers alike as one of the greatest promoters in the history of the wrestling business, and the reputation is deserved, but he came very close to failing during those first two years after the war. It's never easy to run in competition with an established promoter, and Tom Packs was one of the strongest in the country. Packs had been running wrestling shows in St. Louis since 1922 and had paid close attention to his business. He had the local news media in his pocket, too, so it was hard for Sam to get any coverage of his cards. Of course, Sam himself knew a lot of people in the business whom he could call upon for help, but Packs was the one with all of the meaningful connections, and he used

them to block Sam's booking any of the top talent.

As a result, when he resumed business in 1945, Sam tried to attract fans by using a lot of famous old-timers whose best days were long past — Ray Steele, Dick Shikat, Ali Baba, John Pesek, Steve Casey, even Ed Lewis, who was in his mid-fifties by then. It was an opportunity for the fans to see some of the great stars of an earlier era, but their style of wrestling was too slow for modern tastes and featured none of the brawling and flying moves that characterized the current style. By the time I returned to St. Louis and bought out Packs, Sam was struggling to survive.

It was literally no contest as a promotional war for almost two years. In late 1948, though, Sam was fortunate enough to sign Buddy Rogers, and suddenly he was competitive. That's the kind of a draw Rogers was. He was a sonofabitch to deal with, but the fans flocked to see him. He had established himself as a popular attraction in St. Louis two years earlier. Then, working for Tom

Packs and wrestling as a clean-cut hero, he was billed as the "Atomic Blond," the "idol of the bobbysoxers," even the "Sinatra of the mat." By the time he returned in November 1948 to work for Sam, he had become the villainous "Nature Boy," a character he had developed while working in Southern California, and he was hands-down the hottest attraction in the country. In his first appearance for Sam, he sold out the Kiel Auditorium, the first sell-out of Sam's promoting career, and he remained a hot card while he was in the territory.

What proved to be more important to Sam's survival was the formal alliance of Midwest wrestling promoters he helped put together that summer. The members actually shared and rotated talent with each other — that's how he got Buddy Rogers — and this was the critical element in Sam's survival. I have to give him full credit, too, because it was something a lot of us in the industry never thought we'd see.

Wrestling had operated for years as a silent, shared monopoly, but there had never been any real structure to it. It was like a house built on quicksand — the foundation was constantly shifting. Promoters would cooperate when it served their needs, usually at the expense of someone else, and then they'd quarrel, or one would get especially greedy, or someone would come along with a better deal. Someone who was your associate one day could be your blood enemy the next, and a year later, he might very well be your pal again. It was a crazy, compassionless, cutthroat business, and a promoter really had to stay on his toes to survive.

Sam's idea was actually fairly modest in scale: to create a cooperative arrangement based on written bylaws with a handful of other promoters in the Midwest who, like Sam, were having problems with competitors in their territories. He was merely trying to survive in St. Louis, nothing more, and he figured he couldn't last long without some help. It was almost a last-ditch effort on his

part, and he had to be enormously relieved once he began calling around, explaining his idea, and actually finding some receptive ears. In July 1948, he and five other promoters — Tony Stecher of Minneapolis, Max Clayton of Omaha, Al Haft of Columbus, Pinkie George of Des Moines, and Orville Brown of Kansas City — got together in Waterloo, Iowa, at the President Hotel, to discuss their problems.

That was the very modest beginning of what became the National Wrestling Alliance, which was to become the dominant wrestling organization in the world in less than five years. Obviously, the business was ready for some sort of formal structure because promoters from outside the Midwest became interested in it, and the ranks had swelled by 13 more promoters by the end of its first year. By 1956, a total of 38 promoters belonged to the organization, effectively giving the NWA control over virtually every wrestler in North America and Mexico.

Essentially, what the NWA founders agreed to do was share talent within the Alliance and withhold wrestlers from rival promoters in their territories. They also agreed to respect each other's territorial boundaries and to actively police the industry by blacklisting any wrestler who did "anything detrimental to wrestling." It was those three points which eventually got the NWA in serious trouble during the mid-1950s with the U.S. Justice Department. The blacklisting provision was obviously designed as a means of keeping the boys in line. It usually came into play when a wrestler had the gall to complain about poor payoffs, or went to work for a promoter who was in competition with an NWA member. The feds ruled the NWA was engaging in an illegal restraint of trade, and the case would have gone to court, with all kinds of embarrassing disclosures resulting, if the Alliance members hadn't signed a consent order, agreeing to eliminate those illegal bylaws. Of course, being wrestling promoters, some of the Alliance members resumed their old practices as soon as the feds lost interest in the

case.

Sam's cooperative agreement with the NWA stung my operation a little, but it wasn't serious enough to worry me. In fact, my business was very good. In 1947, Bill Longson and I recruited "Whipper" Billy Watson, a very big name in Toronto, and laid out a three-way competition for the world title that played to big houses all over the country. We were clearly winning the St. Louis promotional war, too, and in the fall of 1948, only three or four months after he had set up the organizational meeting for the NWA, Sam called me and asked for a meeting. I figured he was probably ready to toss in the towel, and I was right. Buddy Rogers was drawing some big houses for him at the time, but Sam was worried his business would go right back into the toilet as soon as Rogers left for another territory. Meanwhile, the NWA was gathering some serious momentum, and Sam saw the chance to make some real money by presiding over its affairs, so he proposed to me that we merge our operations into a single

promotion.

I wasn't interested because I figured I'd get the St. Louis territory all to myself if I just waited him out, and I was prepared to do that. I had an ulterior motive, though, for turning him down. I was having serious doubts by then about the way I was running my own operation, and I wanted to keep Sam on a string while I weighed things in my mind.

My problem was I was almost worn down to a nub. My major partners, Eddie Quinn and Frank Tunney, were busy with their own operations in Montreal and Toronto, so I was working a 24-hour day — doing the wrestling, the booking, the payoffs, overseeing the publicity, getting the talent together. I actually reached that weird stage where you're so tired you can't even sleep well at night. It was hard on my marriage, and it was hard on me in terms of my professional pride. It became difficult to climb into the ring every night and perform at the level I demanded of

myself. Something, obviously, had to be done about it.

It was actually an easy decision when I finally confronted the matter. I had wound up with the title belt after a year of matches with Longson and Watson, and I was making a very good living with it. With that kind of money coming in, I decided I didn't need the office headaches. So, early in 1949, I called Sam and arranged a meeting wherein we quickly cut a deal.

Our arrangement was simple: we were 50-50 partners in a single St. Louis promotion. I would handle the wrestling and Sam would handle the paperwork and the bookings.[29] The only problem area was the world heavyweight title. Between us, there were two versions at the time, mine and the one recognized by Sam and the NWA, and that was one too many. Since I agreed with Sam that we would operate our promotion as a member of the Alliance, it looked like my title was the one which had to go.

Mine was the more credible title, in part because it could be traced — allowing for a couple of detours during the craziness of the early 1930s — more or less directly back to Frank Gotch. What really gave it credibility, though, is that it had been recognized as the "undisputed" title for years by an organization called the National Wrestling Association, which was the "ruling" wrestling authority in 39 states during the 1930s and throughout most of the 1940s.

The Association differed from Sam's Alliance in a key way: the Alliance was strictly a private group composed of promoters, while the Association was composed of members of the various state commissions that regulated wrestling and boxing. An offshoot of the National Boxing Association, it was actually more powerful in its heyday than the Alliance ever was because the members, who were political appointees in their home states, had authentic muscle. If a wrestling commissioner said you couldn't work, you didn't work. (Of course, being political creatures, a lot

of those guys had their hands out and could be persuaded to see things a certain way. That's also what made them dangerous, though; if a promoter crossed them or refused to cooperate, or if a rival promoter got to them, they could make his life miserable and seriously hurt his business.)

The Association ruled the roost for a long time, but it had begun to disintegrate at about the same time the Alliance was created. Some states had stopped their hands-on supervision of wrestling, which depleted the ranks of the Association, and some key members dropped out or were replaced with people who were less effective or less corrupt. It simply lost its momentum, and by 1949, when Sam and I became partners, the Association's remaining members had seen the handwriting on the wall and were ready to let the Alliance become wrestling's sanctioning body.

That was perfectly fine with me. The title problem could be resolved easily enough by having me wrestle the Alliance's champion, and

we'd put both belts on one guy. In time, we'd just forget about the Association's belt and have a single title. The only hitch in the plan is that the NWA's champion was Orville Brown, and there was some serious friction between the two of us. Neither of us was anxious to yield his title.

Our problems dated back a long way, to an incident when I was just a green kid. I was supposed to wrestle Brown in a "two-out-of-three falls match" in St. Joseph, Missouri. Brown insisted on winning the match, but I refused to go along with that because Tom Packs — who was involved in a promotional war at the time with Brown and his partners — was not about to let one of his boys lose a match to the competition. Brown had to back down and ask for a draw, which we did. I'm sure the incident stuck in Brown's mind because there was obvious tension between us for several years whenever our paths would cross.

It had never come to a head, though, and might even have gone away had Sam Muchnick and I not

gotten involved in our promotional war in the late 1940s. As one of the founding members of the National Wrestling Alliance, Brown was assisting Sam, lending him talent, which meant, in effect, that he was running opposition to me in St. Louis. I retaliated by running shows in some of Brown's towns, including Kansas City and Wichita.

It was tough at first because Brown was politically wired in his area and used his connections to keep us out of the good arenas, but I finally started to draw some money there. That's when Brown began to get nervous, and pretty soon, I was hearing talk in dressing rooms around the country that Brown was planning to challenge me to a "winner-takes-all match."

Well, that was ridiculous on the face of it. There were a lot of big egos in the business, including mine, but Orville Brown led the parade. He was a good performer, but he was never more than a fair wrestler because he didn't want to put in the time in the gym. It's boastful, I know, but he simply

wasn't in my class. He was one of those guys who built his rep by hiring a publicist to say wonderful things about him, and he actually convinced a lot of people, including himself and even Sam, that he was a top hand.

I shouldn't have let the talk get to me, but it finally did. I sent word to Brown through the dressing-room grapevine that a contest sounded just fine to me and that I was coming for him. He obviously got the message because, a couple of weeks later, I got a report that he had beaten a very fine wrestler, Joe Pazandak, in a gymnasium workout. My first words were, "I wonder how much Orville paid him." I wasn't being flippant. I'd been around a few years by then and had learned a thing or two, and I was certain Brown had simply paid Pazandak to lose in hopes of frightening me off. That one episode was enough to persuade me that Orville Brown would never agree to wrestle me in a contest.

Sure enough, he never agreed to the match. And I

was right about the Pazandak story, too. I ran into Joe six or seven years later in the Minneapolis territory, and during one road trip when it was only the two of us in the car, I decided to broach the subject. "Joe, I've got something to ask you, and I would really appreciate a straight answer," I said.

Joe looked at me and smiled. "I already know what the question is because I remember all the talk," he said. "You want to know if Orville Brown paid me to lose to him. Well, he did — he paid me $2,000. I guess he wasted his money, huh?"

Neither of us laughed because it was only a small act in what was ultimately a very sad story. In the summer of 1949, not too long after Sam and I became partners, Brown and I reluctantly put aside our differences and decided on a way to settle the title situation. We would meet in a title-unification match in St. Louis in mid-November, and Brown would win, a victory that would give the Alliance more

credibility. Within a year, he would drop the title to me. Additionally, as a guarantee that he would abide by our agreement, Brown would put up a large amount of cash as a performance bond, a standard practice in the business. Sam Muchnick, who agreed to hold the money, would return it to Brown as soon as he switched the title to me.

About two weeks before the match, though, Sam called me in Louisville where I was wrestling and said there had been a terrible accident: Orville Brown and his business partner, a wrestler named Bobby Bruns, had been driving back to Kansas City from a match in Des Moines, Iowa, when they had collided with an 18-wheeler and were critically injured. Somehow, both men survived, but Brown ended up paralyzed for a long while on one side of his body. He eventually recovered to the point he could walk a little bit, but only with great difficulty. Almost a year after the accident, Brown tried to make a comeback, but he was seriously limited in what he could do in the ring, and after a handful of matches, he called it quits

and retired as a wrestler. He lived in constant pain for the rest of his life.[30]

It was a tragic situation, and while I'm sure this may sound cold to some people, it was made even worse by all of the accompanying publicity. Brown and Bruns had wrestled each other in Des Moines the night of the accident as part of a long-running "feud" between the two, and the fact that these two so-called enemies were traveling together in the same car after the match wasn't lost on anyone. The newspapers in Kansas and Iowa had a field day with the story, and it completely killed the territory. It wasn't worth a damn for years afterward, and it never really recovered to its earlier level.

Almost three weeks after the accident, about 50 NWA and non-NWA promoters from throughout North America got together in St. Louis for a two-day meeting that was originally planned to coincide with the "title vs. title" match. The local newspapers said the promoters planned to discuss

issues affecting the industry — television, multiple champions, etc. — and also hammer out a peace treaty between the two rival promotional groups, the Association and the Alliance, but that was just manure spread by the promoters.

It's true there was a lot of chatter about "issues," but that's all it was — a lot of talk over drinks. As far as the "peace treaty" subject was concerned, it was never on the agenda because everyone had agreed beforehand that the old National Wrestling Association was already dead. The only real piece of business, in fact, was deciding what to do about the Alliance's world heavyweight title, and that was easily settled because I'd already agreed to financial terms. On November 27, 1949, the members of the National Wrestling Alliance voted unanimously to recognize me as their undisputed world heavyweight champion.

Our deal was essentially the same one Orville Brown had agreed to 16 months earlier when the founding members of the NWA decided to name

him their first champion, and it remained the standard contract for the people who succeeded me. Briefly, it stated I was an employee of the Alliance, for the sum of one dollar a year, and would receive my bookings from the NWA president; that I was entitled to one week off for every three weeks that I worked; and that I would be paid 10 percent of the after-tax gross wherever I appeared, plus travel expenses.

The one significant difference in my contract and the one Brown had signed was the amount of the performance bond. The NWA required the bond, in cash, as protection; if the champion refused to go where he was sent, or refused any title match, or if he simply tried to leave town with the title, then the bond was forfeited, to be divided up among the NWA's members. Brown had to put up $5,000 cash for the title. In my case, it was $25,000.

The five-fold increase was an indication of how far the National Wrestling Alliance had traveled in

the months since its creation. Brown's "world heavyweight title" was actually a regional title; about the only places he had defended it were in the upper Midwest. Because of my reputation and visibility outside of the Midwest, where the NWA was adding new members, adding my title had upped the ante.

I had to scramble to come up with the cash bond, but I believe the price was fair because I already knew what kind of money I could make. It was a very sweet deal, in fact. Pro wrestling was booming nationwide, and 10 percent of the gate was big money in the big towns. The Alliance was actually doing me a favor by arranging my bookings.

Our agreement was a one-year deal, subject to renewal at the Alliance's annual convention, and the only criteria I had to meet was to draw money for the members. Obviously, I was very successful at that because I wore the Alliance's belt for almost eight years, from 1949 until 1957, without

interruption. (Well, in a technical sense, I'd have to admit that's not true. "Whipper" Billy Watson wore the belt for several months in 1956, but it was strictly a caretaker-sort of deal. I had fractured an ankle while skiing in California and, with the aid of Novocain, had wrestled on it for five weeks to protect my title. I badly needed some recovery time, so I "deposited" the belt with my close friend Frank Tunney, the promoter in Toronto, because I could trust him. I hobbled into Toronto, shot my ankle with Novocain immediately before the match, and then worked a one-fall, 35-minute match with Watson that I "lost" when I was counted out of the ring. It took my ankle seven months to fully heal, a stiff price to pay for my obstinacy. Once it had healed, though, Watson came to St. Louis for a rematch and dropped the title back to me.)

It's not a boast for me to say the Alliance liked having the belt around my waist for reasons other than my ability to draw money. I had a reputation by then as a serious hooker, and I had been around

long enough to know I had to have my hands up every time I went in the ring. That appealed to the Alliance members because they could use me as a policeman to protect their promotions from outside challenges, and it actually happened a few times over the years. If an NWA promoter was having trouble in his territory with an outlaw promotion, he could settle matters by threatening to have me come in and humiliate the other promoter's top hand in a contest.

The Alliance members also liked having a wrestler as champion because they were naturally leery of each other. The so-called "brotherhood" of the Alliance was a facade, and everybody knew it. Some of them were truly fine people, and a few became valued friends of mine, but the majority was composed of thieves. The one quality all of them shared was a suspicion of each other. Whoever controlled the wrestler wearing the title had a step up on everyone else because he could demand preferential treatment when it came to using his boy, and use that as leverage to

occasionally get a piece of someone else's action by demanding an additional booking fee for himself. It wasn't farfetched to believe that an NWA promoter might even decide to steal the belt and put it on his own boy. Having a champion who could actually defend himself against a double-cross was protection against that ever happening.

It wasn't enough to keep people from trying, by the way. I had a handful of title matches where I could sense something was amiss, or where my opponent had a special relationship with the referee, and I handled all of them in a direct fashion: I hooked the guy and threatened to hurt him if he didn't behave, and that was usually enough. If my opponent was an accomplished wrestler and I had reason to be suspicious of the ref, I'd handle matters by staying near the ropes — so I could duck under them or crawl out if I got in trouble — and never letting him get me into a compromising position.

I worried about a lot of guys, in fact. Some of

them were simply interested in testing me, and a lot of them tested the waters just to see what they could get away with. I understood it because they were good athletes who had pride in themselves and were competitive. But the place for a contest was in the gymnasium or in the ring with a neutral referee. Some guys couldn't risk the neutral-ref part, and I had learned early that you had to go after those kinds and show them they couldn't compete. One effective way to end those situations was to let my opponent get his Sunday hold, one he really had confidence in, and then escape from it. Once that happened, his heart usually fell into his ass and he would behave himself.

One time, though, an opponent came close to getting the job done, and it was a performer, not a wrestler, who did it. I had created some dissension over a period of years with the Houston booking office for a variety of things. I guess the first episode came in early 1943, in San Antonio, when I refused to lose to a guy named "Dirty" Dick Raines. A nice guy, Raines was a non-wrestler

Texas promoters were making a little money with, billing him as a tough brawler, but I wasn't inclined to sacrifice my image and reputation for a guy who couldn't wrestle. Promoter Frank Brown got hot about my refusal, and some harsh words were exchanged.

Another incident occurred during the tail end of my Army days when I was stationed in San Antonio. I wrestled a couple of local dates for Frank Brown and ended up making him very angry again when I refused to lose to Buddy Rogers. That was the first time I'd ever heard of Rogers. I refused because he wasn't an established name yet and he hadn't been in the territory very long. I'd seen a lot of guys come and go by then, and for all I knew, Rogers could have turned out to be just another flash in the pan. I wasn't about to hurt my reputation by building up an unknown, and I said so, which made Frank Brown pretty upset.

A third episode occurred in Dallas where Ed

McLemore, who promoted the town, tried to persuade me to lose the title to a barfly he was pushing, an alcoholic named "Sockeye" McDonald, and he offered me an impressive amount of money. I could have done it because it was my title, but I hadn't changed my attitude. I was not going to put the belt on a guy who didn't know a wrestling hold, and McLemore didn't appreciate my attitude.

Little by little, tension had built. Morris Sigel, the Houston promoter who essentially controlled the Texas circuit because he booked all the talent, was acceptable as far as promoters go and was a good payoff man, but it was clear to me he didn't like my attitude. I simply refused to be moved around like a pawn on a chessboard, and no promoter liked that. Finally, I guess he decided he'd had enough and, if an opportunity ever presented itself, would show me who was in charge. The opportunity presented itself during a hastily booked one-week tour of the territory in December 1950.

I came down with a bad case of flu a couple of days before I was supposed to hit Texas, so I called Sigel and tried to cancel. He pleaded with me, saying the cancellation would really hurt the territory. He said he already had me advertised throughout the circuit, and the advance gate was good in every town. It was okay with him, he said, if I only wrestled two minutes in each town before climbing out of the ring, just so long as I appeared. That seemed like a reasonable compromise, so I agreed.

That wasn't the way it worked out, of course. The first night, Monday, in Fort Worth, the match went 30 minutes. Tuesday night, in Dallas, it went 45 minutes. Wednesday was San Antonio. I got there and discovered I was booked to wrestle a three-fall match over 45 minutes with Paul Boesch. I was feverish and achy with the flu, and I'd already been pulled through a keyhole in Dallas and Fort Worth, so I refused to go along. I told the promoter, Frank Brown, that I'd bent over backwards for Sigel by coming to his territory

when I should have been home in bed, but no one had kept his word about short matches, so I was finally going to do what was best for me. I was going to beat Boesch in a short match and then head for my hotel and some rest. And that was final.

Coming down with the flu when I did is probably what convinced Sigel he could steal the title. I later learned it was what he had been plotting in his mind for some time, and when he heard I was sick, he saw a way he could do it. He would work me hard with long matches in Fort Worth and Dallas, figuring I'd be really run down and off my guard by the time I got to San Antonio, and I worried more about how I felt than about a possible double-cross.

Putting me in the ring with Paul Boesch was supposed to lull me, too, I guess. He was a decent, well-respected man, a former lifeguard who had drifted into wrestling in the early 1930s, but he was no threat to an accomplished wrestler. He had

all but retired to Sigel's front office by then as matchmaker and publicity man and was used as a wrestler only on rare occasions, usually as a substitute when someone didn't appear on time. That was how he ended up being booked with me that night in San Antonio.

Everything seemed normal for a couple of minutes after Boesch and I hit the ring. I didn't suspect a thing when he wheeled me into a corner, so I went along with it. I was leaning back on the ropes, locked up with Boesch, when the referee stepped in and ordered us to break. Boesch stepped back and dropped his hands, so I dropped my hands, too. And that's when he copped a Sunday on me — he brought a punch up all the way from the floor, and it hit me flush on the chin. I didn't see it coming, and the referee was conveniently looking the other way, too.

It was supposed to end the match, and it almost did. I was already woozy from the flu and the fatigue, and the punch came close to knocking me

out. What saved me was my experience. I had enough sense left to stick my head under the top rope and take a nine-count. I did it again, three or four times, and my head began to clear. Then I went after Boesch with a vengeance.

Boesch had taken his best shot, custom-ordered by Sigel, and failed. My adrenalin was pumping and I didn't even think. My instincts were in control. I worked him over for a minute, pulled him into the middle of the ring, took him off his feet, and pinned him.

Ed Lewis, who was traveling with me as my manager at the time, was waiting for me in the dressing room with a puzzled look. "What was going on in there?" he asked me in German. He was half-blind from the trachoma, of course, and hadn't seen the punch, but he knew from the crowd reaction that something had happened. I told him the details, and it hit him immediately that they were trying to steal the title.

Boesch hadn't gotten the job done when he had his chance, and I actually felt sorry for him. In retrospect, I know we were both trying to protect our respective careers. His head was involved in the scheme, but I don't think his heart was in it.

Sigel denied everything when I finally had the chance to confront him in Houston. He claimed Boesch had simply lost his temper with me for some reason, but he could see I didn't believe him for a second. As a result, he walked on eggshells around me from then on, and the upside is I never had another moment of trouble in the Texas territory.[31]

And I'll say this for Paul Boesch, who's gone now: I was a big admirer once I got to know him. He became the promoter in Houston in the 1960s after Morris Sigel died, and he did a helluva job with that town. He was a bright, literate, charming man who did a lot of serious charity work in the community. He also did a lot of writing and public speaking about pro wrestling,

activities that made him an authentic asset to the industry. He was always generous when it came to discussing me, too, once describing me in print as the greatest wrestler he ever saw.

I appreciated that very much. Considering what happened between us that long-ago night in San Antonio, it wouldn't have surprised me if he had said something altogether different.

Endnotes, Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Fans and news media like to refer to the early 1950s as pro wrestling's "Golden Age," but I prefer to think of it in terms of another color: green, as in money. It was a period of expansion, driven by audience demand that was fueled by television, and gate receipts — as well as payoffs for the boys — hit levels no one could have

anticipated 10 years earlier.

It was an era of opportunity for everyone in wrestling. By the middle years of the decade, promoters were running regularly scheduled matches — either weekly, biweekly, or monthly — in more than 500 locations throughout North America, and spot shows probably accounted for at least another 1,000 dates annually. That translated not only into more money for the boys, but into a need for more talent, so the door was opened wider than ever before to guys who wanted to give it a try. No one kept figures on such things, but it's my guess we easily had maybe 1,000 boys in the mid-1950s who could rightfully call themselves full-time professional wrestlers, more than ever before.

Of course, expansion isn't necessarily a positive thing across the board for any business, and there was a down side to all this for pro wrestling. Frankly, by the mid-1950s, I'd seen some changes that had me worrying about our

direction. For one thing, the work ethic suffered in a lot of places. Some of the people who got into pro wrestling during that era had no respect for the industry and cared only about seeing how effortlessly they could collect their payoffs. It wasn't that they were poor performers so much as it was their complete indifference to even learning.

I remember watching two such guys one night as they went through their paces. Their match was gawd-awful, but they didn't care. They were part of a faction that agreed with pro wrestling's critics that the customers were a bunch of morons. Afterwards, in the dressing room, one of them was laughing about it. "Man, that one sure was easy," he said. That was the attitude that too many guys expressed. It never occurred to them it wasn't supposed to be easy, that they could actually improve things for all of us if they'd only try.

It also was during this period that we began to see guys who regularly used blood to get a reaction

from the crowd. Actually, blood was nothing new in pro wrestling. It's impossible to wrestle a match without occasionally getting a bloody nose or a cut, and someone years ago had noticed that the crowd reaction heightened when it occurred. Someone decided a little blood, if used only on special occasions, would add credibility to the wrestling, and it was a simple step from that to figuring out how to get it. When I broke into pro wrestling, it was almost always the result of what was called a "hardway" — a hard rap on the protective bone around the eyebrows, where the bone is like a cutting tool. A lot of boys had scar tissue there, and it would break or rupture easily. It didn't have to be a serious cut, either, because a little blood looks like a lot when it's mixed with sweat.

(Forget that nonsense about a blood capsule. I never saw one in all my years in the ring. I do know, however, about a trick the carnies used to pull when they wanted blood in a boxing or wrestling match. They'd draw blood with a

syringe and then inject it into a condom. The fighter or wrestler would tie off the loaded condom and hide it in his mouth until it was time to bleed, when he would simply pop it with his teeth.)

What was different about the 1950s was the number of boys who relied on blood to get a reaction and how they got it. Prior to then, wrestlers would push themselves up the ladder in a variety of ways — flashy gear, color-coordinated outfits, an aggressive personality, whatever attracted attention — but blood wasn't one of them. The competitive wrestlers especially didn't go for blood because they didn't need it. They achieved success with their wrestling. By the late 1940s, however, we'd begun to see a handful of boys who regularly used blood in their matches, and they used it for one simple reason: they couldn't do anything else. It was the cheapest way of attracting attention, but it worked, and it was a way for them to stay employed.

If I had to point a finger, I'd say the guy who started it was "Dangerous" Danny McShain, a junior-heavyweight performer who was getting blood in a lot of his matches during the World War II era. It was the only thing about him that stood out, in fact, because he was a poor performer. He had obviously picked up on the fact that blood got a big reaction because it got to the point he was bleeding every time he went into the ring. He became a fairly big draw with his act in California and the Texas territory after World War II, and that was enough to catch the attention of other no-talents who decided to try the same thing. It was easier to do by then, too, because they'd figured out how to "blade" themselves, as they referred to it, and their opponents. They'd snip the corner off of a razor blade, wrap the piece in tape, leaving only the point exposed, and then hide it — inside their trunks, in their mouth, taped to their wrist or fingers — until they needed it to cut themselves or their opponent.

Blading became the curse of pro wrestling, at

least in my estimation, for the simple reason it turned off more people than it excited. It was the easy thing to do, however, when a promoter ran out of ideas and talent. Some wrestling circuits, especially Texas, Tennessee, and the Deep South, where there was less of a legitimate wrestling tradition than other parts of the country, became veritable blood circuses. In some of those places, promoters actually paid extra — "green for red" or "getting color" were the expressions — if a wrestler would blade himself in a match.

It wasn't the blood or the indifferent workers that finally caused me to become seriously worried, though. Those were bad enough, but what really caught my eye was seeing how quickly some gimmick performers were rising to the top. I'm not referring to the boys like Buddy Rogers, Gorgeous George, and others I could name; those people deserved their success because they managed to preserve the image of competitive wrestling while doing their schticks. I'm referring instead to the ones so seriously limited as performers they

diminished the importance of real wrestling moves. They, along with the promoters who pushed them, are responsible for the ridiculous comic-book characterizations which constitute pro wrestling today.

Other people would probably argue the point, but I'd say it all began with Antonino Rocca. He was to wrestling what Primo Carnera was to boxing — an unskilled, simple-minded, child-like immigrant who was manipulated up the ladder to the very top by thieves who sucked him dry along the way and couldn't have cared less when he ended up with nothing. The only difference between the two is Carnera was succeeded in boxing by people who could actually fight. The same can't be said for most of the people who followed Tony.

Rocca became one of the two or three biggest names in pro wrestling during the 1950s, and he did it without a lick of wrestling ability and very little aptitude as a performer. He decided he didn't need either, though, because he attracted

large crowds with his personality and his barefoot acrobatics — cartwheels, headstands, slapping guys with his feet. It was some incredibly flimsy stuff, but it worked for him because it was something fresh. He was actually a pretty sad character who enjoyed almost no respect among the boys. It's a side of him the public was never allowed to see.

Rocca was born in Italy and immigrated at an early age to Argentina. Stanislaus Zbyszko, the old Greco-Roman star, and his brother, Wladek, had launched a wrestling promotion there, using mostly locals they had trained, and that's what Rocca was doing when a performer named Nick Elitch came across him during a swing through South America in 1948. Elitch was a good journeyman wrestler who had a very good eye for talent — he also discovered Johnny Valentine, one of the toughest men to ever pull on a pair of tights — and he liked Rocca's act so well he took him away from the Zbyszkos and headed for the United States.[32]

Ironically, I was one of the first people to see Rocca when he first set foot in this country. I was waiting for a flight at the Atlanta airport when I spotted Elitch getting off a plane with this stocky, young, Italian peasant-type who was wearing dungarees, a cheap shirt, and sandals. I said hello to Elitch and he introduced me to the guy, who couldn't speak any English and didn't make much of an impression.

About a month or so later I heard that promoter Morris Sigel was doing gangbuster business on the Texas circuit with an acrobat, a guy billed as "Argentina" Rocca, and I made the connection — it was the guy Elitch had introduced to me in Atlanta. Before long Rocca was a very hot name, and none of the performers could figure it out because the guy was so seriously limited. It didn't matter, of course, because there was no disputing the fact he was magic at the box office, and that's what counted.

The New York wrestling office — run by Toots

Mondt and a couple of partners — was struggling at the time, and they drooled at the prospect of having Rocca. The city had large constituencies of both Italians and Latin Americans. They figured Rocca would draw extremely well with both, so they quietly contacted him and offered him a deal; if he would sign with them, they said, they'd make him a partner in the New York booking office, as well as making him a star on their cards and on their television show. Rocca was a poor, simple-minded guy who had never seen much money, and what they dangled in front of him must have seemed like a fortune, so he signed.

Rocca ran out on his bookings in the Texas territory without a word to anyone, and it caused some serious problems across that circuit. Rocca was really popular there. He was a colorful guy for the time, what with the acrobatics and the barefoot gimmick, and once the promoters had seen the crowd reactions, they had decided they'd make him unbeatable — which was a big mistake because you can only take that angle so far. They

had him beating everybody, though, sometimes in straight falls, and the crowds just kept building.

Suddenly, though, he was gone, with no explanation, and the houses began dropping off. Morris Sigel didn't like it, of course, but he didn't cry. He had been around pro wrestling a long time and had screwed other promoters himself, so this was a business-as-usual situation where he was concerned. New York now had Rocca, and there was nothing he could do about it. If it was possible, though, he wanted Rocca to come back to the Texas territory as soon as possible and tie up the loose ends by working a series of important matches that had been in the works when he had skipped, so Sigel began talking to New York.

Meanwhile, the New York fans warmed to Rocca immediately, and the office decided to push him to the top even faster than they'd originally planned. In only a matter of weeks, thanks to their television, Rocca was a national name, and

promoters from all over the country were calling, trying to get him for a date or two. The New York office was only too happy to accommodate everybody because they had Rocca sliced up like a loaf of bread. Whenever Rocca worked, everybody in the office made money. Since Rocca was already popular in Texas, though, the New York swifties decided they'd send him there first for a couple of weeks.

The first week Rocca was back in the Texas territory, business was great. The publicity he generated since jumping to New York had made him even hotter than he had been originally. The promoters made sure he looked great that first week, booking him with mediocre guys who wouldn't give him any trouble and would make him look good. The second week was a different matter. These were the matches Sigel had been building up to earlier, including one in Dallas against the world junior-heavyweight champion, LeRoy McGuirk, and one in Houston with me for the heavyweight belt. Obviously, Rocca would

have to defend himself in each match because we weren't about to pamper him.

That didn't sit well with Rocca's people. To preserve his national credibility, the New York office wanted Rocca to win all his matches, but they knew that neither McGuirk nor I would do anything to help them. LeRoy was a very salty wrestler who had overcome a significant handicap — he had been blinded in one eye during a childhood swimming accident — to become a top-ranked amateur and then the world junior-heavyweight pro champion during the late 1930s. He shared my feelings about performers. For the good of the house, he would wrestle an occasional draw, but he had too much pride to do it for a guy like Rocca, who wasn't even a mediocre performer. We agreed between us that we'd try to negotiate something that would satisfy everybody, but one thing was a certainty: Rocca would not look good.

We never got around to negotiating anything,

however, because the New York office decided it would rather run. Rocca and Kola Kwariani, a former wrestler who was working as Rocca's road agent on the trip through the Texas circuit, sneaked off in the middle of the night at the end of their first week and returned home. This would be the second time Rocca had run out on Morris Sigel, and again it put the territory in serious jeopardy, only it was even worse this time around. Rocca was booked in the main event in every town throughout the territory, and the promoters had really built up the Rocca matches with McGuirk and me in Dallas and Houston. The advance ticket sales were sensational. Fans were coming in from all over the region for those matches.

When Rocca skipped, the promoters had to substitute for him, and that hurt. It's okay to substitute matches occasionally — sometimes it's unavoidable — but it's absolute death to substitute the main event because that's the one where a promoter has focused all of his planning and advance publicity, and it's multiple death when

you have to substitute the main event in all your towns. Business across the Texas circuit fell off to nothing almost overnight.

Sigel, though, was a sharp businessman, and he had learned a valuable lesson the first time Rocca skipped out on him. When the New York office agreed to send Rocca back for two weeks, Sigel had gotten a contract for his services, a simple matter, really, but something we seldom did. Rocca and the New York office were violating a solid legal agreement when he ran off again, so Sigel went after them, hard.

His first step was to complain to the Texas Athletic Commission, which supervised boxing and wrestling in the state, and the commission responded by yanking Rocca's license. That was no big deal to the New York office because they obviously weren't planning to send Rocca back to Texas. They just laughed it off. What they didn't count on, however, was Sigel's determination. Once he had Rocca banned in

Texas, he began lobbying other state commissions to do the same thing. In those days, the state commissions supported each other and would usually recognize each other's suspensions. As a result, Sigel managed to get Rocca banned practically everywhere in the country — including New York.

It was the New York suspension that finally brought matters to a head. This was Rocca's base, a big-money promotion, but suddenly he couldn't work there. Toots and the other thieves used whatever political juice they could muster, but they couldn't get Rocca reinstated. In desperation, they shipped him out to California where they figured Toots' old political connections counted for something, but Rocca arrived to find he had been banned there, too. He was between a rock and a hard place with literally nowhere to go. The New York office had a hot star on its hands with no place to use him.

Finally, late in 1949, five or six months after

Rocca had run out on the Texas territory for the second time, the New York office came to heel and called Sigel to work out the problem. Sigel told them he would call off the blacklist if they simply brought Rocca back to Texas to fulfill his contractual obligations. The New York bunch didn't like it a bit because they knew what would happen — that Rocca would get punished — but they had no choice. They agreed to send him back for one swing around the circuit, in matches against the people he had been booked with originally.

Rocca and Kwariani arrived back in Texas scared and worried — Rocca because he knew what was coming, and Kwariani because he was afraid we'd ruin the New York office's meal ticket. Word about any losses was bound to get out, and New York was worried about how it would affect their star. On Friday night in Houston, Rocca and Kwariani approached me in the dressing room before our match to see if they could soften me up.

"Lou, I know you're in good condition, and you're a much better wrestler than Rocca, so please take it easy on him, okay?" said Kwariani. "At least do it for Toots, because he's your friend, right?"

That was exactly the wrong approach to make to me. It was all I could do to keep from exploding right there. Toots and me, friends? Hardly. In fact, never. Not after what he had done to me and all the other boys years before in Southern California.

Rocca was standing there nervously as I told Kwariani, "Don't plead with me for your man. We've got a contract, so just get him in the ring and let him do the best he can, and we'll see what happens. Tonight we're wrestling."

Well, that scared them. They grabbed their gear and ran out the door, probably headed for the airport. But Sigel had anticipated something like that and had hired a big, tough-looking deputy sheriff specifically to keep an eye on them. He

was waiting for them right outside the door.

"Where in the hell do you think you're going?" the deputy growled at them, resting his hand on the big, hog-leg pistol strapped to his hip.

Rocca and Kwariani stopped dead in their tracks at the sight of this menacing guy. Then a funny thing happened: Rocca looked at Kwariani with this dignified expression on his face and said, "I told you we shouldn't leave, that we should stay and honor our agreement with Mr. Sigel." Like this was all Kwariani's fault, right? And Rocca spun around and marched right back into the dressing room, leaving Kwariani standing there with the deputy.

I had no intention of hurting Rocca because that would have been like shooting an unarmed man, but I did intend to give him the workout of his life. And that's what I would have done if Rocca hadn't turned out to be such a child. We had a sellout house, but he didn't care — he just wanted

to get out of there as quickly as possible, and he didn't care how bad we looked, either of us. He wouldn't even lock up. I'd go for a hold and he would fall down before I got there. I got so mad and disgusted that, when I finally did get him on the mat, I dropped a knee on his face. I figured it would make him angry enough to do something, but I was wrong. He continued to avoid me.

By the 10-minute mark of the third fall — we'd split the first two — it was obvious to everyone in the house that something was up and the crowd began to boo. They had paid to see a wrestling match, but what they got was more like a track meet. That's when Rocca decided he could save himself if he faked an injury, so he took a dive out of the ring and lay on the floor at ringside, pretending to be injured.

I was about 10 feet away from him when he did it, nowhere near the guy, and it was so obvious he was dogging it that the crowd exploded — and so did I. I followed Rocca out of the ring, grabbed

him by the throat, and pulled him to his feet. "You yellow sonofabitch. You get back in the ring or I'll cripple you right here," I told him. And it's a sign of just how inept he was that he did it. Any athlete would have fought back, but Rocca just nodded okay and crawled back through the ropes. When he turned around, I was right behind him, and he actually locked up, for the first time in the fall. I fed him my head for a headlock, an old sucker move, and he went for it. As soon as he had me, I picked him up from behind with a waistlock, a legitimate Greco-Roman move, and dumped him backwards on his stupid, conniving head. And I helped him down, too.

The impact knocked him out, colder than a wedge. I rolled on top for the pin and then scrambled out of the ring, headed for the dressing room in open disgust. Rocca had proven to everyone that he didn't have any respect for either himself or the fans, and it was a sad thing to see.[33]

I don't know if Toots or Rocca ever figured it

out. It truly wasn't anything personal with me when it came to Rocca, not until he refused to give the fans their money's worth. He had also cost the industry money and integrity when he ran out on the Texas territory twice, so if it hadn't been me, then someone else would have seen to it that he got what he deserved, and it could have been a lot worse. That's the way it was in pro wrestling, as in any other business.

With Toots, though, it definitely was personal. Rocca was Toots' property, and I wasn't about to help put money in that bum's pocket. Beating Rocca was my way of paying Toots back for the way he had treated me years earlier, and I never softened, either. In the years after that match in Houston, I wrestled a lot of matches with Rocca in places like New York, Buffalo, and Washington, D.C., good wrestling towns in his own territory where people thought he was the king, and I would never let him do anything with me. And I didn't worry about making him look bad, either.

Incredibly enough, the Houston episode didn't cure the New York swifties of their behavior, and they almost got Rocca killed as a result a couple of years later. In 1952, they booked Rocca for a one-week tour of southern California. The tour was supposed to end with a match against Baron Michele Leone, the California champion who was a very big card on the West Coast. It was all part of a bigger buildup for a title-versus-title match between Leone and me in Los Angeles, and things could have been worked out so no one's business was hurt. But as usual, the New York people were interested, only in what was good for them.

The Rocca-Leone match was set for Visalia, a good wrestling town north of Los Angeles run by a tough guy named Louie Miller, an old hooker I had worked out with in San Francisco when I was a kid and training with Ad Santel. In the dressing room that night, Rocca's handler, Kwariani, told Louie the bad news: The New York office had decided Rocca had to beat Leone to protect his reputation.

Miller refused. In his mind, the New York group was not only trying to protect its investment in Rocca, it also was trying to hurt the upcoming Thesz-Leone match, which was getting an enormous push. He was right, too. A draw with Rocca wouldn't hurt our plans, but a loss by Leone certainly would, and Miller wasn't about to let anything happen that would dilute our chances for a big house. Sorry, he told Kwariani, but we're going through as planned.

So Rocca and Kwariani decided to pull the same stunt they'd pulled in Texas. "Okay," Kwariani told Miller, "we're walking."

"Cool down," Miller told them. "Wait here a minute. I've got something you should see."

Miller went to the box office and picked up a .45 automatic he kept there as protection against a holdup. Returning to the dressing room, he stuck the gun under their noses. "I've got a sellout here tonight, the best house that I've ever had," he told

them. "If Rocca doesn't wrestle tonight, you two lousy bastards aren't leaving this dressing room alive." And then he cocked the gun.

Well, Rocca wrestled, of course. Maybe it was because he and Kwariani knew as much about Louie Miller as I did — that he was a real hardcase guy, no one to fool around with. Years earlier, during his days as a performer, Miller had a disagreement with another wrestler over something, and he brooded about it for a couple of years. One night, he ran into the guy in a dressing room, and he exploded. He almost beat the guy to death with a two-by-four. I'm not clear on whether the guy ever wrestled again. If you dealt straight with Louie Miller, you had no problems. If you double-crossed him, though, you were living with a dark cloud over your head. No one could ever convince me he wouldn't have shot Rocca and Kwariani if they hadn't honored their obligations.

Rocca's biggest problem was that he was so slow upstairs. Sam Menacker, a former wrestler

who became, in my mind, a terrific TV announcer for wrestling, told me once about a little promotional stunt they'd worked up for a television show in upstate New York, where a bunch of schoolkids had supposedly saved their nickels and dimes to buy a radio for their hero. It was all a fiction, of course, and you can probably guess what was coming. Sam presented the radio to Rocca on TV just before he was supposed to wrestle. During a flowery speech about these devoted little schoolkids, Rocca's opponent charged across the ring, grabbed the radio, and stomped it to bits.

Well, that created the reaction the promotion wanted, and it certainly guaranteed a big rematch for the following week. The crazy thing about the charade, though, is that Rocca bought the whole production. Back in the dressing room, Menacker said, he was practically in tears about "those poor kids" and his radio. No one had taken the time to explain it to him, but he should have seen it for what it really was.

The poor guy lived in a fantasy world and was always regaling us with dressing-room stories about running guns to Haiti, huge financial successes he'd had, and famous women he had bedded. The tales were so wild and absurd that some guys actually called his hand, in front of everyone, but Rocca would never respond. It was impossible to respect the guy.

(I remember one night after the matches when we were showering. Rocca was extremely well-endowed with sexual equipment — Mother Nature's sense of balance, I guess. He was bragging about being so big while a great champion, such as Lou Thesz, was so small. Like most males, I reacted. "The difference, Rocca, is that where I come from, we grow men, not pricks." I don't know if he understood, but I felt better.)

I had him figured out early when I learned his deal with the New York thieves gave him a 25-percent interest in the office. Since the office's

money came primarily from Rocca's bookings, that meant his partners were getting 75 percent of everything he earned. Only an idiot would sell himself so cheaply. He once offered to sell me his 25 percent, and I would have snapped it up if Toots Mondt and, by then, Vince McMahon Sr. [Vincent James McMahon] hadn't been involved. I had worked for Vinny's grandfather, Jess McMahon [Roderick James McMahon], when he had been associated with the New York office years earlier, and I would have been proud to have been involved with him because he was a real gentleman. I certainly didn't feel that way about his son and Toots, though, so I passed. I actually felt sorry for Tony by then, so I was polite about it. I told him it was an extremely attractive offer, but the additional income would put me in an impossible tax bracket, so thanks but no thanks.

In the end, Rocca ended up with nothing but bad health — no money, no insurance, and no property worth speaking of. He spent his money as soon as he got it, usually on cognac and cigars, and when

he died in 1977, he was almost penniless. Toots Mondt and Kola Kwariani didn't do much better. They took their pieces of Rocca and invested the cash at the betting windows and playing the ponies, and that's a fool's game. McMahon was the only smart one. He invested in his business, eventually gained majority control, and put enough away that he was a man of means when he passed away in 1984.

If it seems unfair, though, that Rocca's partners were sharing in the money that he made, then think again. The office earned its money because Rocca was never much more than an acrobat. He couldn't hold up his end of a wrestling match, and they had to be expert manipulators to get the results they wanted with him. At first, a lot of boys would refuse to go along with Rocca because they had no respect for him or his work. The fact they could get people to cooperate says something about how slick his partners were. Each of them made a bundle of money off of him.

Poor, simple Rocca. I wish I felt differently about him, but he symbolizes for me what happened to the industry I loved. Promoters used to keep at least one or two wrestlers around, if for no other reason than to protect their business from outside challengers and to keep the in-the-ring product credible. But the fact is, they never really liked them because they couldn't control them. Once they realized they could make money with guys like Tony, a gimmick performer who couldn't protect himself, they decided they didn't have to push wrestlers any more, and that's the direction they took.

The only consolation for those of us who cared about the business was that it didn't change overnight. In fact, we had quite a run during the 1950s, which saw some very good wrestlers rise to the top of business. There was Verne Gagne, a former NCAA heavyweight wrestling champion and alternate on the 1948 Olympic team, who became one of the top "heroes" of the era. He and I worked a "feud" for several years in the early and

mid-1950s when he was the junior-heavyweight champion, and those matches did big box-office wherever we appeared. I guarantee you they wouldn't have drawn a dime if Verne hadn't been so credible. There was a personal competitiveness and pride there, too, unrelated to money or personality, and the fans could see it in our matches.[34]

I also have nothing but raves for Dr. Bill Miller, an absolutely incredible athlete who stood 6-foot-5 and weighed nearly 300 pounds. He had been a Big Ten wrestling champion at Ohio State, where he won nine letters (in wrestling, football, and track) before turning pro and becoming a huge card in the Midwest as a semi-rough heel. (The "Doctor" was a legitimate handle, by the way: he was a veterinarian.)

Another favorite of mine was "Iron" Mike DiBiase, an all-around athlete from the University of Nebraska. Mike was actually a junior-heavyweight. He was so credible, though, that no

one noticed the size difference, and he became a big card in several areas of the country, especially the Southwest. Pat O'Connor, who represented his native New Zealand in the 1950 British Empire games as a freestyle wrestler, hit it big in the business during that period, too, and we had many handsome paydays together, especially in St. Louis.

Other authentic wrestlers from that time included Ralph "Ruffy" Silverstein,[35] a top-notch collegiate wrestler at the University of Illinois who was the Big 10 and NCAA light heavyweight wrestling champion in the early 1930s; Joe Scarpello, a two-time NCAA wrestling champion at 175 pounds who became a top pro; and Dick Hutton, another NCAA heavyweight titleholder who was built like a truck — 5-foot-10, 245 pounds — and yet was one of the most mobile wrestlers I ever saw.

It also was an era of great performers, guys who followed Buddy Rogers' example and put everything they had into making their performances

credible. There was Johnny Valentine, easily one of the toughest men I've ever known, and Don Leo Jonathan, a handsome, 6-foot-6, 280-pound second-generation wrestler who was so agile he could do nip-ups and drop kicks like a middleweight and could walk the top rope around the ring. Wladek (Killer) Kowalski, another giant at 6-foot-6 and 270 pounds, was one of the top brawling villains of all time, an absolutely tireless worker, always in motion, and a top card wherever he appeared. I also liked some of the former pro footballers who tried their hand at pro wrestling — Leo Nomellini,[36] Wilbur Snyder and Gene Kiniski, all of whom had tremendous pride in themselves and worked especially hard to present a credible product for the fans.

A lot of those guys did very well. In 1951, for instance, when Joe DiMaggio was the highest-salaried player in baseball at $100,000 a year, some of wrestling's top performers were making double that amount. In my case and a couple of others, it was even better. I had a lot of months

where I logged upwards of 10,000 miles on the road and wrestled 20 to 25 matches. At the end of each night's work, there was my 10-percent payoff, so it added up to a nice chunk of money.

Business was so good all over North America that it was all I could do to make my dates as the NWA champion. One week might find me in the South, the next in western Canada. From there I might head for a few dates on the Texas circuit or into the upper Midwest or into New York City. There was no real pattern to it. So long as the payoff was correct, though, I didn't mind. I loved the gypsy existence, and I considered myself lucky to have the opportunity.

If there was a watershed year during that period, it had to be 1952. That's about the time television ceased being a novelty and became a fixture in most Americans' homes. Wrestling had already hit new heights in the major cities, and thanks largely to the growth of television, it also began attracting good houses in mid-sized and small towns where

wrestling hadn't done well for years, if ever. I was never busier, working 194 shows in 27 states, the District of Columbia, all over Canada, and in Havana, Cuba.

What I remember best about that year, however, is the match that took place on May 21 in Los Angeles, between me and Baron Michele Leone, the one Rocca and his partners had tried to derail. California had recognized its own champion since the 1930s, so getting Leone into the ring with me for a title unification match was an important step for the National Wrestling Alliance. It was as close as the NWA would ever come to achieving total dominance of the business.

Endnotes, Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Southern California was a very important market

for both the wrestling business and the NWA in the early 1950s. It was the place where the post-war boom had started and wrestling had become enormously popular there, a mainstream entertainment. The NWA had a couple of members in the area, but business was so good that the California promoters by and large went their own way, creating and pushing their own stars. All we had was a toehold, and when the opportunity for a title-unification match with Baron Michele Leone came along, we jumped at the chance.

It was a wild scene in those days, even by my standards. I'd seen a lot of craziness in the years I'd been in wrestling, but what was going on in the Los Angeles area was something else. The area had boomed like nowhere else in the country in the post-war days, and it was the place where the hip, the young, and the ambitious wanted to be.

Hollywood was responsible for a lot of this, of course. The town had always had a wild side, and it got even wilder in the late 1940s and early

1950s. Movie people were earning bigger money than ever before and spending it lavishly on the good life and parties. The television industry was situated there, too, and that just added to the action. One writer described the scene accurately as "Disneyland with butlers," a place "conducive neither to truth nor to maturity," and that's pretty much the way I saw it.

Thanks to TV and the number of arenas doing business, pro wrestling had a lot of visibility in the area, so there were a lot of doors open to us. The entertainment industry had long recognized a bond with our business and we were welcomed into their social set. There were plenty of outside business opportunities, too, because we were such visible names. One beer company paid me $25,000 just for the right to put my face on its billboards.

Another door opened for me one night when I ran into an old friend from my Army days, a guy named Mel Traxel. Although the California promoters

felt they didn't need a strong affiliation with the NWA to draw good houses, they still liked to use me when they could because I was such a strong card nationally. It was during one of those forays into the area when Mel appeared backstage to say hello. He was well known in the movie industry as a damned good still photographer for a couple of popular fan magazines, Movie Life and Photoplay, and he was earning a good living. I'd always liked Mel, so I started spending a lot of time with him when my bookings took me to the West Coast. We eventually became business partners and bought a nice office building on Sunset Boulevard. It housed Mel's operation and about a dozen Hollywood agents.

Once we became partners, Mel began dragging me along with him when he was shooting for the magazines. I had little to do during the day, so I worked as his grip, carrying his equipment. As a result, I saw a lot of movie soundstages and the inside of a lot of stars' homes as a result. Since I was a famous face in my own right, some of the

stars were interested in meeting me and talking to me about my business. Some of them wanted their picture taken with me. Mel was only too happy to do it, and I ended up with a lot of publicity shots with famous entertainers — Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, Alan Ladd, and many, many others. Mel did an especially nice layout of me with Kirk Douglas and his kids, who were just youngsters then, and it got play in a lot of newspapers and magazines. (Douglas had wrestled during his student days at Lawrence University, a fact that added special meaning to those shots.) It was valuable publicity for the wrestling business and I was happy to have it.36

I had been around long enough and met enough prominent people through wrestling that I didn't let my head swell too much. To me, the stars were just people like the rest of us, some of them nice and some of them not so nice. To tell you the truth, I wasn't much of a movie fan because I used what little free time I had on the road to either work out or party. And yet, I rarely missed seeing the

prominent stage actors in live matinee performances. The most memorable was Charles Laughton in a reading of British literature. I even returned for an evening performance when I had a rare night off.

I also got excited about meeting a lot of the top singers and musicians who worked regularly on the West Coast. Over the years, I had developed a taste for the nightclubs and showrooms where we could see live entertainment, and I respected the entertainers because they worked live, like we did, without a net. Tiger Nelson, a black wrestler who was based in Los Angeles, was well-connected with the local music scene, in a bizarre way — - hung like a well-endowed horse, he would give exhibitions with his appendage at stag shows while singing risqué songs — and he introduced me to a lot of music people. Thanks to him, I was soon on a first-name basis with great talents like Billie Holliday, the Mills Brothers, Billy Daniels, and others I'd encounter while club crawling late at night.

Our favorite playpen was the Melody Room, a club on Hollywood Boulevard. It was the "in" spot for the big stars for a lot of years. The wrestlers knew about it because it was run by Harry Rubin, a wonderful Jewish guy who also was the wrestling promoter in Long Beach, and we were always welcome there. Late at night, after the other clubs had closed, entertainers like Frank Sinatra and Billy Daniels would drop by for a couple of drinks and would end up singing for their friends. (It also was a great place for hustling women. Harry had wired the women's powder room so he could listen in and learn if some woman we'd spotted at the bar was cruising, and whether she had eyes for anyone in particular.)

One night, the Melody Room was the scene of an unscheduled wrestling contest. Harry had a bass player in his band who stood about 6-foot-6 and thought of himself as a pretty tough guy, in part because he had wrestled as an amateur. The guy liked to hassle the wrestlers when they came in, challenging them to wrestle, and since most of us

were careful about bad publicity, we'd steer away from him. This just encouraged the guy more, though, and after awhile, the wrestlers stopped dropping by. Everybody but me, that is. I wasn't worried about the guy, and I certainly wasn't going to let anyone keep me from having a good time. Sure enough, one night while I was standing at the bar with a lady, the guy came over during a break from playing and started making cracks about pro wrestling in general, and me, in particular. When he tried to leg dive me, I lost my temper and took him off his feet. I had him by the arm and was about to hurt him when Harry came running up. "No, no! Don't break his arm!" he shouted at me. "I need the bastard in the band!" So I released the guy's arm, grabbed one of his legs, and snapped his ankle … simple as that. That ended our problem with the guy. I guess he got religion, too, because he never said another hostile word to a wrestler. In fact, he became genuinely cordial. Whenever I came into the club, the guy would wave from the bandstand like we were old friends, and he would send drinks to my

table as long as I sat there.

The wrestling scene in the area was run as a regional-sort of monopoly by four guys: Cal Eaton, at the Olympic Auditorium; Johnny Doyle, who booked Los Angeles; Mike Hirsch, who owned and promoted the Ocean Park Arena; and Hugh Nichols, who promoted Hollywood Legion Stadium and San Diego. In addition to providing talent for almost all of the other arenas and TV wrestling shows in the southern half of the state, they also promoted wrestling in Las Vegas and Arizona, and they made a fortune at it.

Naturally, being wrestling promoters, they were quick with a pencil when it came to paying the boys what they deserved. They were suspicious of each other, too, and the only reason they cooperated for so long is that it was politically advantageous for them to do so. Eaton's son was married to the daughter of the governor, Goodwin Knight. The governor allowed Eaton and his partners a voice in making appointments to the

state athletic commission, which played a big role in protecting the combine's territory from competition. It was a sweet operation, but it was too good to last, of course, and the thieves eventually fell out because of their greed.

In 1952, though, things still were cordial between the partners, at least as cordial as those relationships ever got. They had joined the National Wrestling Alliance a year or so earlier and I had begun working regular dates for them. The two-way street worked well for everyone; they got the additional protection of NWA membership, while I got a lot of publicity and big paydays for working their territory. I also got an up-close look at the promotional end of their business, closer than usual because I was spending a lot of time with them socially, and I can only describe those experiences as sitting on the sidelines watching while Rome burned and they fiddled.

Cal Eaton, for instance, was running around on

his wife, Aileen, and was involved in a long-running scene with a really cute chick. It was no surprise when word got back to Aileen because he would sit with her in his car in front of her apartment where everyone could see them, and word soon got back to Aileen. She hired some private detectives to get the goods on her husband and they bugged the girl's apartment, where they got some pretty salty tapes in which Eaton was talking about how he was going to dump Aileen and marry the girl. Somehow, after she confronted him with the tapes, Eaton persuaded Aileen he wasn't serious, but it was a sticky time for him for quite a while.

Mike Hirsch had woman troubles of a different sort. He learned his wife had been skimming money from the box office at the arena she ran for him in Santa Monica for something like 25 or 30 years. She ended up with a quarter of a million dollars in a secret bank account. Hirsch told several of us about it one night while we were drinking, and he said, "Can you believe that?" The

answer, in unison, from everyone at the table, was an emphatic "Yes!" No one who knew Hirsch could blame her.

Johnny Doyle, who was instrumental in getting Gorgeous George started, was no saner than his partners. I remember one night when he stopped by the office building on Sunset that Mel Traxel and I owned. I used to keep maintenance costs down by doing a lot of the work myself when I was in town, and I had been refinishing the floors when Doyle passed by and spotted my car. He and his date were headed for a party and had stopped to invite me to come along, but I declined, saying I'd catch up with them later.

I walked with them back to his car and watched as they drove off. Just as I was turning around and heading back into the building, I saw another car down the street pull away from the curb and speed off after them. As it went by, I recognized the driver as another girl Doyle had been seeing, a seriously jealous type. I thought, "Hell, she's

likely to shoot Johnny if she catches him," so I locked the building and jumped in my car to follow them.

It was just like a movie chase, these three cars speeding around curves and up and down Coldwater Canyon. It was obvious that Doyle had spotted the girl, too — she was driving a car he had given her — and he tried to outrun her, but she stayed right on his tail and rammed him whenever he slowed for a turn. It was funny in a way — she was beating the hell out of both of his cars.

Finally, on Ventura Boulevard, Doyle stopped at the curb in front of a large department store and ran inside with his date. The other girl drove her car right up on the sidewalk and tried to run them down. Instead, she smashed into the building, right through a huge plate glass window. Well, that ended the chase. The store people called the cops, the girl was arrested, and Doyle calmly got into his car and drove away. Maybe he was still headed for the party, I don't know. Later that night, when

he figured she'd had time to cool off, he went down to the jail and bailed her out.

During that same period of time, Doyle managed to secure a beach house for me in Malibu, right next door to his place. I had been keeping a suite at the Sunset Towers, a very prestigious apartment-hotel and scene of a many wild Hollywood parties. Frankly, I wanted out. I was never one to avoid a party, but the pace was getting to be too much even for me, and I was worried something would happen some night that would bring bad publicity to everybody. The beach sounded like the perfect place for me.

The craziness was everywhere, though — even there. One weekend, when I had a lot of people at the house for a party, this gorgeous Hollywood starlet decided to take a swim and got caught in the undertow. She began screaming for help, and since no one appeared anxious to go after her — the undertow was especially wicked that day — I figured it was up to me.

It wasn't easy, but I made it out to where the girl was and grabbed her. When we made it back to the beach, Mike Hirsch was waiting. He looked her over for a moment, and then he looked at me as if he thought I was stupid. I couldn't figure out what was running through his mind, not until he turned to the girl again. "Why, you stupid bitch," he said. "You could have made it to Catalina Island easy! What are you trying to do, kill our champion here?"

That's when it hit me: The girl was cruising me, and having me rescue her from the surf was her way of getting my attention. It was a very stupid thing to do because both of us could have drowned. I guess the girl had played in too many bad B movies, but the silly thing is that she was no worse than a lot of other people in Hollywood.

I endured all that insanity because we were building to the title match with Leone, and interest was running so high we had begun to think we just might surpass the old gate record of $96,000 that

Ed Lewis and Jim Londos had drawn in Chicago in 1934. The promoters had been teasing the match on television and in the newspapers for a couple of months, so it was big news. They announced Leone and I had signed to meet on May 21 at Gilmore Field, the baseball stadium in Hollywood. I was doing my usual thing — running all over the country and defending the NWA belt — but about three weeks before the match, I cleared my calendar and headed for California.

Wrestling was so hot during this period that Cal Eaton easily sold one of the local television stations on broadcasting live workouts every weekday leading up to the match, and the ratings were unbelievable. Leone and I had an hour apiece virtually every day beginning May 5th, the day I arrived in California, until the day of the match. I figure during those three weeks, no one else in the entire country was getting the kind of exposure we got. I had been on top in pro wrestling for quite awhile by then and was somewhat accustomed to being recognized on the

street and asked for my autograph, but the attention we attracted during that period was more intense than anything I ever experienced in the States.

Of course, I had to have my fun with Leone, who was a pretty sober and serious guy, and I was aided by Vic and Ted Christy, two brothers who were legendary pranksters in the wrestling business. Both Leone and I had set up training camps and enlisted several wrestlers as workout partners for the daily TV shows; Ted was in my camp, Vic was in Leone's. Vic, who was a great friend, would pick Leone's brain about what he wanted to do in his next TV workouts. He would then get in touch with Ted or me and let us know what was coming up. My one-hour spot aired before Leone's each day, so I would go out and do whatever it was he had planned to do, only I would elaborate upon it. Leone was going crazy. He would be watching the monitors, and when he saw me doing what he had planned to do, he would rush around grabbing people, trying to come up with something different. He never tumbled to the fact

Vic was tipping us off because he kept talking to him right up through the final show.

Leone and I were never especially close, but I give him a lot of credit for making something of himself in pro wrestling. He was an immigrant from Italy who had learned his wrestling in the carnivals during the 1930s and had graduated to the arena shows as a junior-heavyweight. He scuffled around the business for several years, mainly working curtain-raisers and middle-of-the-card matches. By the time he hit Los Angeles in late 1949, he had developed the character of an arrogant European nobleman, which was very effective. He looked the part, too, with shoulder-length black hair and a pencil-thin mustache, and he always carried himself with this very dignified nose-in-the-air posture, somewhat like Gorgeous George, only it wasn't an act with Leone.

He was another of those guys-you-love-to-hate performers, and the southern California fans responded to him at once. When the promoters

decided to give him a big push, he did so well at the box office that they hurriedly put their version of the heavyweight title on him and left it there for a long, long time. Leone became such a popular figure in the area that he even had a half-hour weekly television show in which he dispensed snide "advice" to the lonely and lovelorn. One of the networks picked it up, too, and gave it a 13-week run nationally. Leone was smart enough to capitalize on his fame and he became a very wealthy man with several valuable pieces of real estate in California and a profitable business in Mexico.

(Leone was a big star of sorts in another venue besides wrestling. In Santa Monica, about a hundred yards from my rental house, lived a wealthy and kinky middle-aged bodybuilder who was a permanent fixture at nearby Muscle Beach, where all the plateheads worked out daily. The guy used to invite carefully selected bodybuilders and beach rats — young females who were turned on by big muscles — back to his Roman-style

beachfront place in the evenings for wining, dining, and other assorted types of fun. The old lecher had a live-in chef and a houseboy, and he served only the finest imported vintage wines and gourmet food, so his invitations were coveted. The centerpiece of his pad was the master bedroom, which had an ornate light fixture that concealed a movie camera and a peephole for direct viewing of the athletic activities that took place on the king-size bed. Leone used to hang around Muscle Beach, too, hustling checker games for money — he was a damned good player — and he was such a well-known face it was only natural the bodybuilder would become acquainted with him. I don't know if Leone was wise to what was going on at the guy's pad because a lot of the participants were unaware they were providing the evening's Candid Camera entertainment, live, from the master bedroom, but I had it from reliable sources that Leone was the undisputed star of a lot of those shows — the world champion of cunnilingus. I'm serious when I say he was genuinely famous in some liberated circles, including the movie-star

set, and films of some of his performances were popular entertainment among that crowd on the West Coast for a long while. He had to cut back on his extracurricular activities for awhile after our match at Gilmore Field, though, because he ended up with a badly cut mouth — which led Mike Hirsch to crack, "Well, it looks like Leone won't be able to fuck for a month."

All of our hard work to build up publicity for the title-unification match paid off. We drew more than 25,000 people and a gate of $103,277, the first six-figure gate in wrestling history. It's too bad that the match itself was so poor. To me, it came across like a bad gymnasium workout. I was very unhappy about it because Leone and I could have wrestled rematches all over the country and drawn big money, but the publicity from the first match virtually killed the opportunity.

The problem was Leone, and, at first, I couldn't figure it out. He wasn't the greatest wrestler in the industry, and it was impossible to make sharp-

looking flying spots with him because he would find some way to screw them up. But I knew that going into the match and intended to keep it simple. The only way to make the match interesting was for me to put myself in some compromising situations where it looked like Leone was giving me a hard time. He probably didn't even realize I was doing it to myself because he was too busy trying to hang on and actually wrestle me.

So I did my usual thing when I was matched with an uncooperative performer: I began to slap him around, trying to either wake him up or make him angry. The fans actually liked that part of the match because Leone had been working as a villain in all his matches and they enjoyed seeing him get some of his own medicine, but the fans had no idea what was really going on. After I won the first fall and returned to my corner, Mike Mazurki, a former wrestler and old friend who had established himself as a popular character actor in the movie business, came over. Mike was a very

nice, mellow guy, not at all inclined to use profanity, but he was swearing a blue streak that night. "That stupid sonofabitch. That idiot," he said, referring to Leone, "What is he doing?"

Leone was obviously unhappy about something, and it was a long time before I learned what it was. At the time, I figured he was angry about losing the match and his title to me. I was pissed off, too, because I could see all the money from future rematches going out the window, and wasting an opportunity to impress the fans was something which always upset me — because it could cost me a paycheck down the road. Not making an impression with the fans was the equivalent of disappointing the boss.

I could have retaliated and hooked Leone, but I didn't because that would have brought me down to his level and made the match even worse. I decided I'd salvage what I could, though. When we went back out for the next fall, I resumed slapping him around, literally whacking the hell

out of him, like punching a bag in the gymnasium. I'd lead with my right hand, jabbing above his head, and catch him flush with my left when he would duck. I did it over and over … and the stupid bastard fell for it every time. It was like his brain was frozen. He would see the right coming and he would duck, smack into my left. It was almost ugly because he was actually helping me beat him up. At the end, Leone's lips looked like raw hamburger, one of his cheeks was cut, and one of his eyes was black and swollen shut. He probably ate soup for a week.

Leone and I wrestled together six or seven times over the next couple of years, all over the country, and the rematches should have done big business for us, but we had killed the golden goose in that first match and we never did recover. Still, we kept trying. Every time we met, I'd talk with him before the match and spell it out. I'd tell him, "Leone, if you'll give us a good match, instead of trying to wrestle me, we can revive this thing and make some good money."

He replied in this thick Italian accent, "Well, thatsa my style. Thatsa what I do."

To which I would say, "Well, then, I'll show you my style," and we'd go out there and I'd whack him around again. Once in a while I'd hook him, just to make him squeal, but that didn't accomplish anything, either. You'd have thought he would decide to cooperate just to avoid a beating, but it never happened.

Finally, one night in a nothing wrestling town where a sell-out was something like $3,000, Leone wrestled one hell of a match. Together, we had the crowd on its feet and shouting for more, the kind of match we should have had in Los Angeles. Afterwards, I went back to his dressing room for an explanation. "You were super out there tonight, Leone. Now, why in the hell couldn't you have been doing that all along? Do you realize the kind of money we could have made with these return matches if you hadn't messed up the first one?"

"Well, they didn't pay me properly for the first one, and I was upset about it," he said.

So that was the reason he had refused to perform in the ring. I should have guessed it. Leone was a competent wrestler who always tried his best to keep things credible in the ring, and that made him a credit to pro wrestling, but he definitely had a shortage of gray matter upstairs. To succeed, one had to learn how to cut the best deal for himself in negotiations with promoters, but Leone never learned. I had been paid $10,000 for the match at Gilmore Field — in advance — because that's the way I did business on big shows,[37] and Leone could have come close to matching it if he had been a businessman. As it was, he ended up with only one or two grand.

"Leone, you're one stupid asshole," I finally told him. "They needed you, and you had all the leverage in the world. If you'd done it properly, you could even have gotten your money up front, like I did. For that matter, you could have done it

the night of the match. They had 25,000 people sitting out there, waiting for us to go on, and $103,000 in the box office. You could have refused to leave the dressing room until they gave you what you wanted, in cash, and they would have come up with it. Just because you can't handle your business is no reason to get angry with me and give the fans a lousy match. That's why I've been whacking you around out there."

I still have to shake my head when I think about how things could have been so much better. He was a very headstrong guy and had made up his mind that refusing to cooperate with me in the ring was the way to get back at the promoters who wouldn't pay him what he thought he was worth. It was literally a situation of cutting off his nose to spite his face.

There was definitely an upside to the Leone situation, though, and it was considerable, so I guess it was worth it. When Leone lost the California title to me at Gilmore Field, the NWA

belt was established in California, the last major market in the country to fall in line. A couple of other promoters in small territories continued to push their own "world" champions, but they had absolutely no credibility outside their areas. For the next 30 years, the NWA title was the only one that really counted.[38]

Endnotes, Chapter 11

Chapter 12

I'd like to have fonder memories of the National Wrestling Alliance than I do. It's true I made a lot of money during my years with the group's heavyweight title, and I got to see a lot of the world and had some fabulous times as a result. I went first-class all the way, too — the finest hotels, the top restaurants, the most elite nightclubs, the best tailors. To me, the world belt meant something. It was the same title Ed Lewis

and other great wrestlers had held, and I tried to wear it with class.

Unfortunately, I had a lot of friction almost from the beginning with a lot of the NWA members, and the bad taste in my mouth has never really gone away. Some of those people were accomplished thieves, and it was a struggle in a lot of towns to get the money — 10 percent of the after-tax gate, plus transportation — I had earned. I was never shy about demanding a fair shake, and I couldn't be controlled or forced to do something in the ring I didn't like, all of which were qualities that did not endear me to promoters who were used to running roughshod over their talent.

A lot of them became reluctant to have me in their dressing rooms because they felt I was a bad influence on a lot of the performers. I'm not trying to make a hero of myself, but it's nevertheless true that I always had a lot of sympathy for journeymen wrestlers who tried to give wrestling their best effort, and when I was matched with one who

could use a career boost with a good in-the-ring performance, I'd give him one. The trouble with that, in the eyes of many promoters, is that I was helping the wrong boys. The promoters were primarily pushing "rasslers," gimmick performers and barflies with no wrestling ability, and I would never help those guys look good, which was what the low-level promoters wanted.

I also was free with advice about how to handle oneself in the business. If I saw someone who was giving it his all and not getting anywhere, I was only too happy to sit down with him and offer suggestions, especially about dealing with promoters. By the mid-1950s, I had been wrestling for 20 years and had seen almost all the little stunts that a greedy promoter would use to avoid paying a wrestler what he had earned, and I was unselfish with information and advice if it would keep someone from getting screwed.

The major source of my conflicts with the NWA, however, had to do with my schedule — three

weeks on, one week off. I loved the road, but that kind of grind could be a killer because a long string of one-nighters can really beat a man down physically. What really made it so unpalatable is that "extenuating circumstances" were always coming up and forcing me to work two or three dates during my off week. It ended up causing a lot of resentment between me and my St. Louis partner, Sam Muchnick, that lingered for a lot of years. As the NWA president during those years, Sam also was getting a three-percent booking fee for every date I logged, which could amount to $40,000 after taxes for him each year, so he wasn't inclined to protect me. The more I worked, the more money he made. I couldn't afford to get sick and I couldn't afford to get hurt, and if I had a bad match or got injured, the promoters would bitch and complain. Things got to the point where arguments about my schedule were a fixture at the NWA convention every year.

It all came down to money, of course. At one convention in the mid-1950s, the cheap bastards

griped about me flying first-class to my dates. My transportation costs were part of the fee promoters had to pay, and the general assembly and championship committee decided they could save money if I would fly coach. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. We were doing sell-out business everywhere I appeared in those days, everybody was making money off of the world title, and here they were proposing that the person with the visibility and the belt ride at the back of the plane. It was pennies, not dollars, and they wanted to pinch even those. No one appeared to give any thought at all to the effect it would have on pro wrestling's image to have fans and non-fans alike see the world heavyweight champion flying in the cheap seats.

Nothing came of the idea, though, because I really got my back up about it, and I had a couple of members like Eddie Quinn and Frank Tunney in my corner. They spoke up for me during the general assembly, which softened some members, and I finally killed the proposal when I got a

chance to have my say. "I'll go along with the idea and ride coach," I told them, "but only for the promoters who were my friends or had treated me square in the past." As for the guys who always had a reason for paying less than we'd agreed, the guys who always had excuses like, "Well, the gate was lower than expected because we handed out a lot of passes," or, "Our expenses were higher than usual," I explained I would fly first-class at my own expense to their towns and they would pay me the difference as part of my fee. That ended the discussion because the vast majority of NWA members were in the latter group.

One dispute I didn't win involved the NWA's decision that the champion should not appear on cards that featured women wrestlers, midgets, wrestling bears, or any kind of carnival act. Everyone agreed credibility was critical whenever the champion appeared, and even the promoters who used a lot of those acts conceded they didn't exactly enhance their chances for projecting a first-class image, so the rule was

adopted unanimously.

It died almost immediately, though, when Sam booked me with promoter Al Haft in a small town in Ohio where the show was being held in a high-school gymnasium. As I was walking through the lobby on my way to the dressing rooms, I spotted a poster announcing the night's lineup, and noticed there were women wrestlers on the card. I found the matchmaker who was handling the show, an old wrestler named Frankie Talaber, and told him I wouldn't be wrestling. I had nothing against the idea of women wrestlers, but it's a fact I never actually met one — a wrestler, that is — during my career. Every single one of them were performers, and their whole act was designed to titillate the males, so I was happy when the NWA ruled I didn't have to appear with them.

Talaber said he wasn't aware of the NWA's rule, but the matches were already advertised and the crowd was expecting to see me as well as the women, so he wasn't sure what he should do. He

called Al Haft, who called Sam in St. Louis, and Sam called me at the gymnasium.

Sam was loyal to Al Haft because Haft was one of the people who had helped him when we were running in opposition to each other in St. Louis after World War II. In fact, it was Al Haft who was instrumental in getting Buddy Rogers for Sam, so I could understand the strong feelings between them. On the phone that night, Sam admitted Haft had made a mistake by billing me on the same card with the women, but he said I should go ahead and wrestle, as a favor. I was really irate, but I had to comply. I had posted an appearance guarantee which I would lose if I didn't appear — I had expected that Sam would tell Haft to refund it, but he didn't — so I wrestled. The worst part was losing face with the wrestlers in the dressing room who had overheard me talking to Talaber about not appearing. It was one of the little incidents that stuck in my craw for a long time, especially when Sam and the members continued to ignore their rule, and it eventually made it easy for me to quit

the NWA.

All those thieves under one roof at the annual conventions was something to behold. One of the early meetings was a real fiasco, which said something about the membership. It was at the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas, the place that gangster Bugsy Siegel opened and ran before the mob eliminated him. Mike LeBell, who was the son of Aileen Eaton, Cal Eaton's wife, had booked it for the convention, and no one could understand why. The place was badly run down and the air conditioning was off, even though the convention took place during the dead of summer. It was a miserable experience for everyone, and we learned later that Mike LeBell's gambling habit was the reason we were there. He had run up a large tab at the casino, and getting the NWA convention booked there was his way of paying off.

At another NWA convention, also in Las Vegas, I asked the members for help in getting some films

of wrestlers I had arranged to book in Japan. I needed to send the films over to publicize the wrestlers, but no one was inclined to help because several of them were negotiating for the same deal. All my years of effort for them obviously didn't mean anything, so I was pretty discouraged and disgusted when we broke for lunch.

Ray Gunkel, who had been a great amateur wrestler at Purdue and another one of the guys I always enjoyed working for, came to my rescue. He had become a successful promoter in Georgia and had a very good television show. He invited me to join him for lunch and, almost off-handedly, said I could have his films. As we were headed downstairs, we passed a group of NWA members who only minutes before had been swearing love and brotherhood to each other. One of them was saying as we walked by, "Don't worry, we'll take care of that sonofabitch," referring to another NWA promoter who had been part of the meeting. Ray and I had to shake our heads and laugh. Some of those people had ice

water for blood.

I actually looked forward to most of the conventions, though, because it was an opportunity to spend time with my dear friend Eddie Quinn, who ran Montreal, which in my book is the only real city in Canada. It was like a little bit of Europe, and it really came alive at night when my work day was through and I was ready to party. It was a tough gangster town, too, but that was no problem because Eddie also was involved in the fight game, which was run by those people, so we were never hassled. A lot of mobsters were involved in nightclubs and restaurants there, so the wrestlers who worked for Eddie were always treated very well.

Eddie, an Irish kid from the Boston area, was one of wrestling's great success stories. He was smart as a whip and used his brains to build one of the great wrestling promotions of the world. I had met him in the Boston territory during the late 1930s when I was wrestling some dates for Paul

Bowser, the old thief who promoted the title match between me and Steve Casey. At the time, Eddie was Bowser's office gopher and the designated promoter for Waltham, Massachusetts, which is where he got his start on the promotional side.

Bowser provided talent for Montreal during that period. He liked the job Eddie did with Waltham enough that he sent him to Montreal in 1939 to watch over things and to continue to act as manager for Yvon Robert, who had become an enormously popular card in the town. Just prior to that, the people who ran wrestling at the Montreal Forum, a hell of a good facility, had ruined the town in an infamous incident when the loser of the main event was supposed to unmask. When the unmasking didn't happen, the fans rioted. They tore up seats, broke windows, even stormed the box office, and the publicity was so bad that the city fathers announced they were barring wrestling from the Forum forever.

Eddie's plan was to simply sit back and wait

until things cooled off in Montreal and then try to re-open the wrestling promotion with Yvon Robert as the star, only this time he planned to own it for himself. It was a long wait, but Eddie's patience finally paid off. During his early stint in the area, Yvon Robert had become acquainted with Elmer Ferguson, a famous sportswriter who had a lot of influence in Montreal. Robert arranged a meeting between Eddie and Ferguson in which Eddie proposed a deal: If Ferguson would use his influence with the city fathers and persuade them to allow Eddie to run wrestling shows in the Forum, Eddie would pay him 10 percent off the top of all wrestling productions at the Forum, for as long as Ferguson lived.

Ferguson agreed to try, and although it wasn't easy, he finally got the building. Eddie kept his word, too, and Ferguson became a wealthy man as a result. (It wasn't an unusual situation, in case you're wondering. Another legend of the sportswriting fraternity, Prescott Sullivan, had a similar deal in San Francisco with Joe Malcewicz,

in which he used his clout to help Joe get started in return for a piece of the promotion. In fact, it was standard practice in lots of towns to quietly put the local newspaper's sports editor on the payroll in return for guaranteed coverage of the wrestling.) As soon as Ferguson got the Forum for him, Eddie called to ask if I'd work some dates for him in the area. He couldn't pay me a lot, he said, because he was building his territory slowly, running matches in Ottawa and Quebec City, before opening up the Forum with a major show, but he promised to pay as much as he could. I didn't mind the small payoffs for awhile because I was wrestling dates in the Northeast at the time and doing okay. Eddie's territory was easily accessible to me, too, and I was intrigued with the idea of building a promotion from the ground up, so I agreed.

After quite a few spot promotions over the next three months, we had it ready. Eddie's first card at the Forum had Yvon Robert and me in the main event, and it sold out immediately. That was the

beginning of 25-year run that saw Montreal and the surrounding area become one of pro wrestling's hottest money-making machines. Eddie and Yvon, who had a piece of the promotion, became very wealthy men, and they were able to accomplish it because ego and vanity had no place in their partnership. They were only interested in doing what was best for their business. They also paid top dollar to the top talent, and Eddie boosted the cards even higher by bringing in famous fighters like Jack Dempsey, Max Baer, Jersey Joe Walcott, Jack Sharkey, and Rocky Marciano to referee the big main events. What a town!

Eddie actually ended up making more money than he needed, if that's possible. He built himself a fabulous home, and he purchased the El Morocco Club in Montreal from some mob types, brought in a top chef from New York and the biggest names in show business, and ended up with another money-maker. He was a natural entertainer himself, with lots of funny lines, so he fit right in with the show biz people. He also began to spend a lot of time in

New York, carousing and club-hopping, and he struck up a long-running relationship with one of the girls in Jackie Gleason's TV chorus line, the June Taylor Dancers. Bit by bit, over a period of years, his success turned to survival. By the late 1950s, he was drinking heavily and spending so much time away from Montreal that the office rats were playing with his money.[39]

It was a wild ride while it lasted, though, and the NWA conventions were made tolerable for me because I knew Eddie would be there to keep me entertained. For instance, at the convention in Santa Monica, Eddie spent the entire time picking up everyone's bar tabs, and I began to worry he was overdoing it. I finally mentioned it to him one night as he was signing yet another bill, and he laughed. "Here, look at what I'm doing," he said, pushing the tab in front of me. He had signed it "Fred Kohler," using the name of the promoter in Chicago who was the source of some problems for both Eddie and myself at the time. Eddie signed Kohler's name to tabs all week, and when Kohler

checked out of the hotel, he was presented with a bar bill for several thousand dollars, and he had to pay it.

Another of Eddie's charms is that he also was very upfront about the caliber of people he was associated with in the NWA. A lot of them liked to preach trust and loyalty, but Eddie knew the vast majority of them were hypocrites and lowlifes who'd stage a dogfight if they thought it would draw money. At one annual meeting, the membership had listened attentively to a report from some self-important judge in Waco, Texas, who had been brought in to mediate an internal dispute between two Texas promoters. The judge had obviously resolved the matter in a way that fattened his own pockets, and at the end of his report, Eddie stood up and remarked, "Well, this guy looks like the type who'd steal a hot stove and come back the next day for the lid, so I suppose he'll fit right in with us." A lot of people laughed at the remark, but some members got indignant, as always happens when someone hits too close to the

truth.

The biggest difference between Eddie and the vast majority of the other NWA promoters is that he recognized it was the in-the-ring talent that pulled the wrestling business' cart. Some of the members, especially the older ones, had come out of the carnivals, and I could forgive them because they were mostly tent-spawned illiterates who had learned only one way to survive in a very rough world. The others, though, were like slime to me, with no morals and no regard for anyone else. They genuinely believed they were the heart and soul of the industry, that their success was due solely to their individual genius as promoters, and had nothing to do with what the performers were doing in the ring. They had no respect for wrestling, real or otherwise.

In fact, a lot of them had no idea what they were seeing. An example was Salvador Lutteroth, who ran wrestling in Mexico City. I went there in 1954, the first time the NWA champion had

wrestled in that country, for a match against Gory Guerrero, an authentic wrestler who was extremely popular with the fans. Of course, being that it was Mexico, where wrestling had no tradition, it shouldn't have surprised me to find out Lutteroth didn't even know the difference between a performance and a contest. Prior to the match, Lutteroth came to my dressing room and looked at my gear — black robe, black trunks, black wrestling shoes, and a white towel.

"What do you plan to wear into the ring?" he asked.

"You're looking at it," I replied. Well, this surprised him because he had never seen anyone with such simple ring gear. His card that night was an example of what he regularly presented as wrestling: a Frankenstein monster, a Batman, and several masked wrestlers, and every one of them was simply a tumbler, an acrobat. I told him, "Mr. Lutteroth, tonight you're going to see something that you don't see down here very often —

wrestling!"

What I meant was an American-style performance match. After Gory and I were through, Lutteroth came back to my dressing room to express his appreciation. "I see what you meant," he said. "That was Olympic wrestling, wasn't it?" The guy didn't have a clue that Gory and I had just worked a pro-style match, so I had to sit there and explain the difference to him.

It wasn't only the low-end promoters who were in the dark about wrestling. Once, when Sam Muchnick and I were in Dallas together, we sat in the audience at the Sportatorium to watch one of the matches, one involving a boy who had been a hot amateur. In order to promote him with the fans, the promotion was using the old carnival gimmick of having him wrestle challengers from the audience in time-limit contests, and he had run up a string of easy wins. His opponent that night was a local strongboy, a muscleman type who looked like he could handle himself, and I was interested in

seeing how things worked out. After watching five minutes of their match, in which nothing the fans considered exciting was happening, Sam turned to me and asked why the kid didn't just finish it.

"Sam, this is a contest," I explained. "It takes time, and it's not always exciting to watch." Sure enough, about five minutes later, the kid saw an opening, hooked his opponent, and pinned him. Sam understood performing, but I was surprised he had spent his entire life in our industry and still didn't recognize an elementary fact of real wrestling — that you had to be patient in a contest and wait for your spot.

Sam was far from being alone in his ignorance, though. In the Oregon territory, for instance, promoter Don Owen and his brother liked to see real wrestling once in a while, so they'd occasionally put up $50, winner-take-all, for a contest. The designated boys would go out and perform a match, split the $50, and neither Owen nor his brother ever knew the difference.

It was all very amusing to those of us who could wrestle, of course, but it also was frustrating for me. I believed devotedly that the continued success of pro wrestling was dependent on using boys who could keep some semblance of credibility in the ring, and that meant using wrestlers and authentic-looking wrestling holds and moves. Within the NWA, though, the trend was very much away from that, and no amount of arguing on my part could persuade the majority of the members. Later, after I'd moved on and pro wrestling had become the circus it is today, a lot of them told me I had been right, but that was no comfort.

By the mid-1950s, I was viewed as a rebellious champion because I was so outspoken among the NWA members about the direction of the business and about a lot of issues relating to my treatment. I'd come to especially hate the idea of working the tank towns by then, believing our credibility was damaged by having the world heavyweight champion appear in places where the

promotion was lucky to draw a $500 gate. In addition, the rings in a lot of those places were seriously substandard, with very little padding and dirty mats, so the risk of serious injury or infections was always present. There was plenty of money to be made in the major cities, so I was continually arguing that I could be used more effectively if my bookings were confined to those markets. It just made sense, especially in terms of credibility. Of course, that would have hit Sam Muchnick and the promoters where it hurt them the most, in their wallets, so I never got anywhere. I continued to argue, though, year after year, and a lot of the NWA members grew weary of it.

So why didn't they move to dump me? Because I was still earning big money for them. The houses were good wherever I appeared, regardless of who I wrestled. If I wrestled one of the other top cards — someone like Verne Gagne, Johnny Valentine, Antonino Rocca, Killer Kowalski, Don Leo Jonathan or Buddy Rogers — business was especially good, and often a sell-out. That's all

that really counted with the promoters, and so long as the money was rolling in, they were willing to stomach my complaints.

By 1957, however, I decided I'd had enough, and it was Ed Lewis who helped me decide what to do about it. Ed and I had joined forces in late 1950 when some of the friendlier NWA promoters helped me sell the entire organization on the idea of hiring him as my manager and advance man. The millions Ed had earned during the 1920s and 1930s were almost gone, and he was working by then as the official greeter at the Los Angeles Athletic Club. It was a prestigious place, but it was a demeaning job for such a proud man, and Ed wanted out. His reputation was one of immense credibility. He also had a lot of contacts and was still well known by the sports media, so it seemed like a good idea to take advantage of that. He was pleased when I suggested it to him.

The plan was simple. While I worked the tank towns in a territory, Ed would work the large

cities as my advance man, talking to the news media and building up the publicity for my upcoming matches. Publicity had always been a problem for me because I couldn't walk into a newsroom and tell the sports editor, "I'm a great wrestler and I'll be appearing here Tuesday night." Ed could do it, though, because he had unbelievable charm in addition to a great reputation.

Naturally, some of the NWA penny-pinchers balked at the idea of anything that would cost them money — Ed was to get three percent of the gate wherever I worked — but there were enough sensible members in the organization to get the idea approved. And they weren't disappointed, either. Whatever money he earned was a lot less than he deserved because Ed saw to it we got undreamed-of visibility that paid off at the box office. The Ed Lewis/Lou Thesz team was an incredible bargain, better than they could have possibly hoped for, and I'm proud of the fact wrestling has never had another one to equal it.

Our association lasted several years, and it was a privilege for me to be in his company. The hours I spent with him, listening to his stories of the old days and absorbing his advice, were some of the richest of my life. Also, there wasn't a city in the United States of any size he didn't know intimately, so my life on the road was made all the more memorable because of him. For one thing, he was a genuine gourmet and couldn't be fooled when it came to food. We ate in some of the finest restaurants in the country, places Ed had discovered years before, like Luchow's in New York and Henrici's in Chicago, and if it happened to be a place where he was friendly with the proprietor and chef, we were given the red-carpet treatment.

It was the same thing at the hotels. Ed was a familiar face at almost all of the truly great ones, especially the older ones — the Astor in New York, the Bismarck in Chicago, the Willard in Washington, the Roosevelt in New Orleans — and it didn't matter whether we had reservations or

not. Ed could get us a room simply by appearing at the front desk and announcing his name.

He also was one of the most gregarious people I ever knew, which made us something of an odd couple. I was a loner and had always liked my privacy on the road, and I continued to live that way even when Ed and I hooked up. Ed, however, had to get out and greet everybody. If we stayed in a strange hotel, by the end of our first morning, he would know the manager, the maitre d', and the head waiter. After two days, he would know everybody in the place, including the guests, and he would have a kind word for everyone when he ran into them. It buoyed my spirits just to have him around, especially in the mornings, because life on the road could get pretty repetitious and boring; you had wrestled an hour the night before, you'd gone to bed late because you usually went out to eat and have a few drinks after the matches, and sometimes you didn't get any real sleep because you had to get up early to catch an eight o'clock flight or start driving to the next stop. Ed was

always cheerful, though. By the time I dragged myself down from my room, he would be waiting in the hotel restaurant with coffee and fruit, and he would always smile and say, "God, it's a great morning to be alive!"

By the early part of 1957, Ed had come to share many of my feelings about the NWA. The year before, at the Alliance's annual convention in Tulsa, Oklahoma, some of the members wanted to cut Ed loose. They argued that he had accomplished what we had set out to do — namely, to establish the NWA and its champion in the news media as the premier wrestling organization in the world — and they no longer needed his services. What the cheap bastards were really looking to do was get back the three-percent fee they were paying him. I bowed my neck, though, and with the help of some sympathetic promoters, got the idea killed, but it didn't make Ed feel very charitable towards the membership.

Ed was frustrated, too, about the NWA's insistence on booking me into the tank towns, and he lobbied Sam Muchnick about it at every opportunity. "It actually hurts you," he told Sam once. "The fans in these small towns are asking themselves, 'What kind of a champion is this if he would work such a small town as ours? You don't see the New York Yankees playing ball here, do you?'" I knew that kind of talk went on because some of those fans had been bold enough to say it to my face, and I always lied and said, "The promoter is a personal friend and we're doing him a favor." Sam wouldn't budge, though. "The NWA members are responsible for booking Lou in those small towns," he replied, "and if that's where they want to use him, then that's where I have to send him."

One night, as Ed and I were talking about the direction the business was headed, he suggested I take another page from his book and simply handle my own career. "Look, you don't need the NWA to claim the world heavyweight wrestling title," he

said. "You've got the skills and the reputation. You can claim the title for yourself, arrange your own bookings, and take it around the world if you want to. Horse trade your skills and your name for bucks. If you play your cards close to the vest and make the right kind of deals, you ought to do fine. I haven't seen anyone who's capable of giving you a problem, but even if someone should happen to beat you, that would still be okay. At least we could point to the guy and say he was the undisputed world champion."

It was an exciting idea. Ed had done it himself in the 1920s, wrestling on his own throughout Europe, India, Pakistan, and the Far East, and I was attracted by the notion of following in his footsteps. Venturing alone into someone's backyard and wrestling him on his own turf was a very tricky situation because there was no one to protect you against a double-cross. The other guy owned the referee, too, and it was very easy to find yourself disqualified if you didn't stay alert. I was a very competitive guy, though, and I always loved

a challenge. To be honest, I recognized that I was one of the few men in pro wrestling who had the background and the pure wrestling ability to attempt something like that, so I decided that's exactly what I would do.

The NWA itself provided me with the opportunity almost immediately. American-style pro wrestling had caught fire in Japan, thanks primarily to a former sumo wrestler by the name of Rikidozan who had begun his own wrestling promotion. Riki, as we called him, was doing very big business by importing American wrestlers as opponents, and he was anxious to get me over there for a title match. He figured it would draw an enormous gate and would also give him even greater credibility with his fans. The NWA members, who for once were smart enough to see the opportunity for what it was, were happy to oblige, and I was booked to wrestle Riki that October in Tokyo.[40]

About three months before the match, the

wrestling promotion in Australia called me directly and said they had heard about my booking in Tokyo. Why not extend my trip, they said, and work some dates in Australia? I took the offer to Sam and the NWA championship committee, but they weren't interested. American wrestlers had toured Australia many times over the years, as far back as the 1880s, but it was never a very lucrative area, and since the NWA didn't have any members there, Sam and the committee couldn't see any advantage in sending me. Besides, an Australian tour would take me out of the United States for a couple of weeks at the least, and the NWA members would rather have me at home, working their tank towns and putting money in their pockets, until it was time to head for Japan and the match with Riki.

Nevertheless, I was definitely interested, so I made my own deal with the Australian promotion. That didn't set well with the NWA, of course, especially when I notified them I was taking their heavyweight title with me, and a

couple of members insisted I resign as champion and return the belt. I was actually ready to do that, but I had already worked out my tour so I would hit Australia before heading for the match with Riki in Japan, and it was important to both Riki and the NWA that I be wearing the belt around my waist when I got there, so they backed off.

I tried to talk Ed Lewis into coming with me, but he really disliked Australia. He had worked there many years earlier when conditions were fairly primitive, and he wasn't anxious to see the country again. "Forget about it, Hunky," he said. "You're not going to make any money there. Europe is a lot better, and I can help you set things up there because I know the top promoters on the Continent."

As usual, he was absolutely correct, about both Australia and Europe, but I was already committed to Australia and didn't want to back out. I did tell him, though, to start arranging something for me in Europe because I had decided that as soon as the

Japan match was out of the way, that was where I was headed next,. I was about to become a free man.

Endnotes, Chapter 12

Chapter 13

That tour of the Far East in 1957 was one of the great adventures of my life. I was 41 years old, at the absolute physical and mental peak of my wrestling career, and it's a damned good thing I was, too, because trouble dogged me almost every step of the way.

Actually, it began rather pleasantly, with a stopover in Hawaii. I had been wrestling dates on the islands for years and I loved the place because it was like a paid vacation for me. Promoter Al Karasick would usually put me up for a minimum of six or seven days, and since he ran only one

show a week, the other days were holidays. This particular trip was no different, an opportunity to get some sun, fun, and rest before I headed for Australia and Japan, and we — my wife, Fredda, accompanied me — took full advantage.

Once we boarded our plane for Australia, we put the fun and games behind us. I was scheduled to tour the continent for three weeks and I headed there with an old wrestling expression in the forefront of my mind: You'd better have on your long tights. In the old days, long tights were what a shooter wore when he was wrestling a contest. The tights were made out of wool, and once they got wet with perspiration, a wrestler could hold his opponent like a vise with his legs. In time, the expression came to mean you'd better have your guard up and be ready for a challenge.

By then, I had been warned about Australia by a number of people besides Ed Lewis — not the country itself, but about the man who ran the

wrestling there. His name was Dick Lean, and he was literally the wrestling czar of the continent. He had an iron grip on the talent and the promoters, and if you didn't do exactly as you were told, he would see to it you didn't work. I had also heard him described as a thief and a grade-A asshole, a guy who liked to push his performers around and who would use every trick in the book to cheat you on your payoffs.

Lean lived up to his advance billing, in spades. From the moment we had our first meeting in Melbourne, in a grimy, little walkup office that had nothing but a dirty linoleum floor, a roll-top desk, two straight-back wooden chairs, and a giveaway calendar on the wall, I could see the man had no class. He also was rude and openly contemptuous of wrestlers. The guy didn't even have the courtesy to offer me so much as a drink of water.

"I hear you're supposed to be quite a wrestler," he said. "Well, things are a lot different down here

than what you're probably used to. It's my policy to check out the talent before they work for me by having them wrestle a contest."

"I'd be only too happy to oblige," I replied. "My price for a contest is $10,000."

"No, no, you don't understand me," Lean said. "I expect to see a contest for free, just to see how you handle yourself. We don't pay for training matches. That's the way things are."

"You're the one who doesn't understand," I said. "I'm a professional. I don't give away my skills. If you expect me to entertain you with a contest, then you'll have to put up money to see it. I can tell you, though, that from what I've been told about your territory, you don't have anyone around here who's capable of giving me a contest."

He didn't care for that kind of talk because he certainly wasn't used to it, but I couldn't have cared less. He had already spent a lot of money

advertising me around the country, and as a result, I had him over a barrel. And he knew it, too. If he insisted on bending me to his way of doing things, I'd simply walk out and catch a plane for somewhere else, leaving him with a big problem. He finally agreed that, seeing as how I was the NWA world heavyweight champion, an audition wasn't necessary.

I probably wrestled nine or ten matches in Australia during the next couple of weeks and business was very good. It was a horrible experience, however, because I had to fight Dick Lean for every dollar. I was supposed to get 10 percent of the after-tax gate, payable immediately after each show, when Lean and I would sit down to go over the swindle sheet. It was the same story every time — he would try to take off last year's rent, maintenance, publicity, and advertising — all the typical tricks — and we had some bitter arguments.

I was supposed to wrestle some dates in New

Zealand during my third and final week, but I was fed up with Lean by then and anxious to leave. Fortunately, in the meantime, another business opportunity had appeared in the form of a giant Hungarian wrestler by the name of Emile Czaja. He was a big star in Singapore under the name of King Kong, and he also booked the wrestling promotion there.

Czaja had seen some newspaper stories about my Australian tour, so he and one of his partners hopped a flight to Sydney and looked me up. Over dinner and drinks, they made their pitch: They wanted me to wrestle one date in Singapore, against King Kong. They were willing to pay me a decent guarantee in advance — $3,000 — and pay all my hotel expenses, as well. It sounded good to me, so I accepted, saying I'd be there within the week. It was en route to Japan, and therefore, a gift.

Dick Lean wasn't pleased when I told him I was leaving without completing my dates, and that's

putting it mildly. I had been a royal pain in his ass because I wouldn't roll over and let him screw me out of my payoffs, but he had also made a lot of money with me and was expecting to make a lot more during my final week. He pleaded with me to reconsider, even offering me more money, but I'd more than had my fill of him, so I refused.

The thieving bastard had one card left up his sleeve, though, and he played it. We had a verbal agreement that he would pay all Australian taxes on my wrestling payoffs, but when Fredda and I arrived at the Sydney airport for our flight to Singapore, I was informed that the taxes had not been paid. I owed $6,000 U.S., the officials informed me, and I wouldn't be allowed to board the plane until I paid it. I was tempted to head back into town and beat the money out of Lean, but I'd seen enough of his face to last me the rest of my life. I was carrying a lot of traveler's checks with me, so I coughed up the money and we headed for Singapore.

I'm not one to forgive and forget, though, and I'd like to think Dick Lean went to his grave cursing himself for pulling that stunt. I had no hope of ever recovering that $6,000, so I decided I'd recoup by doing whatever I could to ruin Lean's business. I got my first chance about a year later when I learned that Dara Singh, a great Indian wrestler and a good friend of mine by then, was booked in Australia. Dara, the British Empire champion at the time, was a very famous name in Asia and Europe as both a wrestler and a movie star, and since he had never appeared in Australia, it didn't take a genius to see that he would draw tremendous crowds. I simply waited until I heard that Lean and his people had begun advertising him, then I went to Dara and persuaded him to work instead for Eddie Quinn in Montreal, for a lot more money. Dara agreed and cancelled his Australian tour, which was a crushing disappointment to the wrestling fans in Australia. Lean's business went straight into the toilet and stayed there for a long, long time, and I did my bit over the years to help it stay there, too. Whenever I came across a big-

name wrestler who was booked in Australia, I'd wait until Lean was advertising the guy and then I'd arrange something more lucrative for him elsewhere. I figure the cancellations and money wasted on advertising cost Dick Lean at least 50 times what he had stolen from me.

Singapore was a wild, wide-open place in those days, but after Australia, it looked like paradise to me. We arrived to find that Emile Czaja and his people had put us up in an expensive suite at a fabulous hotel, the world-famous Raffles, and had arranged a big cocktail reception in our honor with lots of important dignitaries on the invitation list. They had also set up all kinds of news media interviews and advertising to promote our match. It was during an interview with one of the newspaper people, however, that I learned I was dealing with another set of thieves.

"Watch yourself," said the writer, a Christian-Indian named Eden Peters who was the sports editor of the Straits Times, an important English-

language newspaper in the Far East. "Singapore can be a very rough place, and these people have a very bad reputation here. Whatever they've promised you, you better be sure you have it before you get in the ring."

A couple of days after our arrival, I still hadn't seen any money, so I decided to check things out … and it's a good thing I did. The hotel manager told me Czaja and his people had put the tab for the cocktail reception and some other entertainment on my hotel bill without laying out a cent of their own. Obviously, since I wouldn't be leaving the hotel until after our match, it would be easy for them to stick me with the bill.

I called Czaja and told him I wasn't getting into the ring until I had my money. "Okay, we'll take care of it today," he said. I had an account with Bank of America, and since they had a branch in Singapore, I told Czaja to deposit the money there.

On the day of the match, the money still hadn't

been deposited, and the hotel hadn't received any payment on my bill, either. I called Czaja's office again and informed one of his partners that unless I had my money before nightfall, the match was off. The guy said there had been some problems and they'd send the money over to me immediately. About an hour later, there was a knock on my hotel room door. I opened it to find two large, hard-looking Indians in burnooses and a little rat-faced Cockney who did all the talking. He hadn't brought the money, he said, but he had brought something else. He nodded at one of the Indians, who flashed a big knife.

I laughed, which wasn't the reaction they'd expected. "Let me tell you who's sitting in here with me right now — the American consul, the British consul, the sports editor of the Strait Times, and his managing editor," I said. "Would you like to say hello?"

The little Cockney stuck his head inside the room, and sure enough, there were the very people

I had named. I was a visiting American celebrity and they had dropped by to extend a formal welcome.

"Look," the Cockney said, obviously flustered, "we don't want any trouble. We just want to make sure that you don't cancel out on the match tonight."

"There won't be any trouble if you people just come up with the money and pay my hotel bill by match time," I said. "Otherwise, these two Indians can wrestle each other tonight."

Well, several hours later, the Cockney appeared at my door again, only this time he had the money with him, a fat stack of American one-hundred-dollar bills. He accompanied me down to the lobby where I asked the manager if he had someone who could verify whether the bills were legitimate. He said he did and led us back to a cashier who examined the bills while we stood there. "I don't appreciate this," the little Cockney said. "This is an insult."

"And I don't appreciate the way you people do business," I replied. "If you people want this match, just shut up and let the man inspect the money."

It was real American currency, and it was exactly what Czaja had agreed to pay me, $3,000, so I sent the Cockney back to his boss with word I'd see him at the arena. It was getting close to match time, so I grabbed my gear and headed out the door. On the way, I stopped at the desk and asked if my hotel bill had been paid yet. It had not.

As soon as I got to the arena, I looked up the guy who was running the matches that night. I told him I wasn't pulling on my tights until I got word from someone I trusted that the hotel bill had been paid. I'd gotten my fee for the match, but Czaja had agreed to pay all my hotel expenses, and a deal is a deal. "It's too late now. We'll do it immediately after the match," the guy said.

"Sorry, but that's the way it is," I answered. "If

you can't pay the bill right now, why don't you get up in the ring and sing a couple of songs while someone goes and does it for you?"

Well, they were definitely in a bad spot. They had a sell-out house, close to 8,000 people, and they'd have a riot on their hands if King Kong and I didn't wrestle, so they gave in. The office sent a runner to the hotel with the money, and as soon as he returned with a receipt marked "paid in full," I informed them I was ready to wrestle. I was still angry, though, so I let them sweat for several minutes. They must have rung the ring bell for five minutes before I appeared.

It was a risky proposition to get into that ring because I didn't know the referee and I certainly had no reason by then to trust Emile Czaja. If I ever met a character who was capable of trying to steal the title, that was the guy. My guests from earlier that day — Eden Peters, his managing editor, the American consul and the British consul — were backstage with me, so I pulled them aside

just before I started for the ring. "Watch this thing closely tonight," I told them. "I'm not looking for any favors, but I don't want to be disqualified for using a legitimate wrestling hold or anything like that. If you see me pinned or if I submit, that's okay, but I don't plan on getting robbed, so I'd appreciate it if you'd watch these characters for me."

It was another situation where I needn't have worried. Emile Czaja had once been a good Greco-Roman wrestler, and he had built himself into a hot attraction in Singapore and Southeast Asia, but I'll never understand how he sustained it for so long because he was far past his prime when I met him. He was clumsy and fat — about 300 pounds — and he had no stamina at all.[41]

About four or five minutes into the match, as we were locked up in the wrestler's opening position, he backed me into a corner and then reached for what we called a salto, a legitimate hold where you hook your opponent's arms and then do a

backbend, throwing him over your body onto his back. I thought to myself, "Thank God, he's actually going to do something," so I let him have the move. When we got to our feet — I actually had to help him up — I said to him in German, "Again." So we did it again. The crowd loved it, seeing their hero on the offensive, so I told him, "Once more." He looked up from the mat, his chest heaving, and replied, in German, "I cannot." After only three moves, he was completely out of gas. After that, it was like wrestling with a dead cow. It was an absolutely horrible match, one of the worst ones of my career.

Late that night, after I was back in my hotel suite and having a few drinks with my guests, I got a telephone call from Emile Czaja. "After our match tonight, I know you think I am nothing," he said in his thickly-accented English, "but we are having a party here to celebrate the good business that we did together, and I would be honored to have a drink with you."

I could hardly believe my ears. I'd seen some corrupt, double-dealing, dangerous people during my years in the wrestling business, but this guy genuinely worried me more than anyone I ever encountered. By then I was aware that Czaja and his people had committed offenses a lot more serious than stiffing a wrestler on his payoff, and I was relieved to be getting out of Singapore. "Look, don't give me any more of your bullshit," I finally said. "The way you do business, you'd probably try and stick me with the tab for your party. I've got a seven a.m. flight on Quantas to Hong Kong, so I'm getting some sleep. All I want to say to you is goodbye." And I hung up the phone.

That was the end of our Singapore escapade, but we kept up our guard until we boarded the plane. The hotel manager was kind enough to put an armed guard outside our room, just in case Czaja decided to send someone over to recover his money. Since kidnapping was a thriving industry in Singapore, Eden Peters and the British consul

had warned us not to take a cab to the airport, so the following morning, we waited in the lobby until Peters arrived to pick us up in his own car. Our flight left on schedule and the plane couldn't get us to Hong Kong fast enough to suit me.

After Australia and Singapore, I was ready for a break, and Hong Kong was definitely the place to take it. It's one of the great cities of the world and the home of one of my all-time favorite hotels, the Peninsula. That's where we stayed until it was time to head for Japan and my NWA booking with Rikidozan.

Frankly, I was a little uneasy about Riki because I'd had some trouble with him in the past, and the unpleasantness I'd experienced in Australia and Singapore had only heightened my wariness. The NWA had sanctioned the matches in Japan and was providing the referee, but this was Riki's backyard, where anything could happen, and the stakes were a lot higher than they'd been at my

other stops. Japan had become a very hot market for pro wrestling, and Riki was its hottest star.

Rikidozan's real name was Mitsuhiro Momota, and he was a Korean, a fact not revealed during his lifetime because he and his partners feared it would hurt his popularity with the Japanese, who are among the most fiercely racist people in the world. He had once been a sumo wrestler, but he dropped out in 1950 — or was kicked out, if you listened to some stories — and was looking around for something to do with his life when pro wrestling caught his eye. American wrestlers had been touring Japan since the beginning of the U.S. Occupation in 1945, wrestling each other, and Riki figured that a Japanese promotion could be successful. Bobby Bruns, who toured Japan after he and Orville Brown had a falling-out over the Kansas City territory following their auto accident in 1949, agreed to teach Riki how to wrestle pro-style, and he brought him to the States. Riki proved to be a decent performer, and a colorful one, too. Before too long, he was a hot item with

the Japanese-Americans and other Orientals on the West Coast and in Hawaii.

In 1953, he returned to Japan, trained some local sumo and judo boys in the art of freestyle and started his own promotion, with himself on top as the main star. The promotion was an instant hit, in part because he was lucky enough to start at about the same time that television was taking off in Japan, and he was able to get his matches on the tube. His shows were a smash because Riki used a lot of American wrestlers, and whenever they wrestled the Japanese boys, it was the Japanese who usually won. The Japanese, after almost 10 years of post-war humiliation, couldn't get enough, especially of Riki. In practically no time at all, he was a national hero.

I'm not sure I had ever heard of Riki, though, when we first wrestled in Honolulu on December 6, 1953. I was pretty busy myself during that period, wrestling all over North America, and my trip to Hawaii was simply another quickie, paid

vacation. I didn't know I was wrestling Riki until I arrived at the arena that night, which was nothing unusual. When I was on the road, I almost never knew in advance who my opponent would be, and it didn't really matter. The only thing I demanded was an exciting match from whoever it was. I was always cautious the first time I wrestled someone, though, until I could see what he had, and experience had taught me that it was the first-timers who were inclined to test me and get one of us hurt.

That's what Riki did that night, beginning at the opening bell. It was obvious to me immediately that he wasn't interested in performing. He kept blocking my moves and hanging on, trying to outwrestle me, so our match quickly turned into a contest. If he had been a little more intelligent about how he did it and waited until he had me in a precarious spot, he might have caused me some trouble. He didn't do that, though, and he didn't have the basic wrestling experience that I had, so it was only a matter of time before I snatched him.

I'll say this for him — on his feet, he was very, very good, somewhat like a good Greco-Roman wrestler. That was obviously his sumo background because the two sports are roughly similar. He had great balance, which made it hard to move him around, so I had to work for an opening.

It was the stepover toe hold with a cross-face that I'd learned years earlier from George Tragos that finally did it. Riki had never seen the hold before, so he was a goner as soon as I clamped it on him. Getting him off his feet was the critical thing. While sumo wrestlers are great on their feet, they're lost on the mat, and I used a single-leg takedown to put him there. Once I had him on the mat, I climbed his frame and nailed him to the cross. He couldn't move, and that's when he decided to behave.

Later, after Riki and I became friends, I learned what had caused him to give me trouble that night. Riki's trainer, Bobby Bruns, had become Al

Karasick's partner in Hawaii, and he had told Karasick that Japan looked like a tremendous business opportunity for a wrestling promotion. They had even taken a trip there together so Karasick could check things out for himself, and he returned convinced that Bruns was right. Riki was already a national idol by then, however, and had things locked up tight. He had lined up television, he had established a very good image in the news media, and he was promoting live shows all over the country. And, of course, he spoke the language.

Riki continued to work occasional dates in Hawaii, where he was very popular, and it was only natural that Karasick would book the two of us together. The night of our match in Honolulu, Riki had told Karasick he needed to protect his reputation back home. He was like a superhero to the Japanese, and he knew the Japanese press would cover our match, so he was simply taking care of his business. A draw would have been fine with me, too, because it wouldn't have hurt either

one of us.

Karasick, however, was your typical wrestling promoter. He smelled a lot of money to be made in Japan and was itching to get his foot in the door. He and Bobby Bruns had decided to steal Riki's territory, and he figured that having me beat Riki would hurt him at home and help them accomplish their goal. It was a very naive plan, as later events proved, but Karasick had no way of knowing that.

"Well, I don't know if Thesz will give you a draw, but I'll go ask him," Karasick told Riki, and he left the dressing room, ostensibly to talk to me. He never made it. I guess he stopped in the men's room and had a conversation with himself. After he waited what he considered a suitable length of time, he went back to talk to Riki. "Thesz won't do it," he told Riki. "He's says he's winning tonight, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Well, Riki got his nose out of joint, of course, and I don't blame him a bit. He had a lot at stake, so he decided he had better do his best and try to beat me.

Meanwhile, Karasick looked me up in my dressing room and added fuel to the fire. "Look, this guy's a real smartass who needs to be straightened out," he said to me. "I think you just need to go out there and hurt him. Give him a real workout before you pin him."

I had already counted the house — an old habit, to keep the promoter from cheating me on my payoff — and I had seen a lot of Orientals in the audience. I had also learned by then from some of the boys in the dressing room that Riki was really popular with the Oriental fans, so those people in the audience were obviously there to cheer for Riki, not for me. It looked like one of those situations where I could help Karasick, so I told him I'd be happy to work something out, like a draw, in order to set up a return match. "Naw,"

said Karasick. "This guy needs a wrestling lesson, and you're the man who can give it to him. Don't worry about the house. We'll survive it."

It seemed like a stupid decision because Riki looked like a golden goose to me, and here was Karasick trying to cut off his head. It was his territory, though, so I just shrugged and said okay.

Fortunately, Riki had forgotten his bad feelings for me by the time I arrived in Tokyo, almost four years after our Honolulu match, and he couldn't have been more cordial. He had promoted the hell out of our Tokyo match, and I was genuinely shocked, in fact, when our plane landed and I saw a mob of people — - the newspapers estimated the crowd at 15,000 people — behind the fences. I was looking around the plane to see if I could spot who might have attracted them, a movie star or some prime minister or other important personality, but the airline crew said they were there to welcome me, the first world champion to ever visit Japan. That's when I began to suspect

that pro wrestling had an enormous future in Japan.

Riki and a man named Mr. Ono, a very important member of the Japanese Diet, met us at the foot of the ramp and marched us straight into the terminal to a press conference where there were maybe 100 cameras and twice that many reporters. It was a very impressive thing. I'd certainly never had a reception like that in the States. Once the press conference was over, Riki and his people whisked us to the Imperial Hotel, the grandest western-style hotel in Japan, where the staff had orders — which they obeyed to the letter — to treat us like royalty.

Once we had a chance to sit down together and discuss our business, I discovered very quickly that Riki was no fool. I had already figured out for myself that he had built himself a money-making machine, but I had no idea of its magnitude until he mentioned, almost off-handedly, that he had received a quarter-million dollars — a fortune in those days, especially in yen — from his television network for the rights to televise our Tokyo

match. He had used the money shrewdly, buying advertising and doing heavy promotion, so interest in our match was front-page news.

I also concluded that I could trust him because he was very straightforward in explaining why it was important that we were honest with each other. Our Hawaii match had taught him he couldn't beat me, he said, and a double-cross in Tokyo wouldn't accomplish anything, either, because he figured I could cut off his supply of American wrestlers if he tried anything. We agreed to wrestle to a draw in our Tokyo match and then come back with another one in Osaka a week later.

Once we had dispensed with business, we began talking about our match in Honolulu, and that's when the truth began to dawn on both of us. Riki said he was very unhappy with me that night because I hadn't agreed to wrestle a draw. "That's not true," I replied, and I told him about my conversation with Al Karasick in the dressing

room. Riki thought about it for several moments and then suddenly reached out to shake my hand. "Now I understand what was happening," he said, and he proceeded to tell me about his own conversations with Karasick. Riki had learned by then about Karasick's plans to invade Japan, but he never thought about our Honolulu match being a part of them.

That was the beginning of a great relationship, and the crazy thing about it is that our match in Honolulu in 1953 didn't hurt Riki at all. It actually helped both of us enormously because the Japanese — who, like Americans, love their fantasies — believed Riki was Superman, and the fans figured that anyone who could beat Riki was someone very special. Riki lost nothing in that match, and I became revered there as the man who beat him, and I was able to return to Japan regularly for 35 years on the strength of that reputation.

I remain indebted to Riki for opening that door because Japan was to become a second home for

me and other American wrestlers. Our Tokyo match, held in a baseball park to accommodate the demand for seats, attracted a paying audience of 38,000 people. A week later, in Osaka, we drew another 30,000. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, and I had already committed to Riki for another tour when we boarded the plane to return home. During the next six years, I would wrestle Riki several times.

Sadly, Riki came to a tragic end, in 1963. He was only 35 years old, a legend in Japan, and his death shocked the country. He had become a heavy drinker over the years, and his habit got worse when he bought a popular Tokyo nightclub, the Chez Paree, from some mob people. Riki liked to hang out there, greeting his customers and drinking at the bar with his pals, a lot of whom were hoods. When he got into the booze, which was often, he became belligerent and aggressive with his customers, and he physically threw a lot of people out of the club, strictly for his own amusement.

One of his victims was a little 150-pound guy, a very minor hood who also was an aggressive drinker. Riki roughed him up one night and tossed him out on his ear, just for laughs. The guy brooded about it for a long time. Finally, one night about six months after their altercation, the little hood got juiced up and headed for Riki's place. Riki was standing at the bar, entertaining a crowd as usual, and he didn't notice when the guy walked in. The little creep walked up behind Riki, pulled out a stiletto, and stabbed him in the kidneys.

Riki's response was to beat up the guy again, only worse than the first time, and to throw him into the street. Then he went back to the bar and resumed drinking. He was acting tough, trying to show the crowd of admirers that he wasn't hurt, and that's literally what killed him. He stood there and drank for another couple of hours before agreeing to see a doctor … long enough for blood poisoning to set in. He died the next day.

Riki's death almost resulted in the death of pro wrestling itself in Japan. His murder was front-page news, and once details about his background were revealed — his ancestry, his association with mobsters — the news media began to dig a little deeper into the business and the backgrounds of other stars. Some ties to organized crime turned up and the scandal caused a lot of fans to abandon pro wrestling. In some cities, pro wrestling was banned, and the next couple of years were rough ones.

It finally bounced back, though, in about 1965 when a young Japanese wrestler named Shohei "Giant" Baba returned home after an extended tour of the States. Baba, a former pitcher with the Yomiuri Giants, had gotten a big push in the States from promoters who were impressed with his size — he stood 6-foot-8, which was abnormally tall for a Japanese — and the publicity made its way back to Japan. The country was ready for another wrestling hero, and Baba returned to grab the role for himself. He was an overnight sensation,

despite the fact that he was only a performer, nothing more than an attraction, and within a year, the business had regained some of its earlier prominence.

Baba, who had the solemn, slow-moving demeanor of a man of the cloth, was in reality a sharp and ruthless businessman. Not too long after his return, he owned his own wrestling promotion — All Japan Pro Wrestling — and was well on his way to becoming an enormously wealthy man. In the late 1960s, he had a bitter falling out with one of his top performers, Antonio Inoki, who created his own wrestling company — New Japan Pro Wrestling — and began competing with Baba for control of Japan. Through their rivalry, Baba and Inoki built Japan into the hottest wrestling market on the planet, and they did it by sticking with a credible in-the-ring style, not the circus or cartoon personalities that characterize the American product today. That's why I was always pleased to work there, and I have great affection for the country and the fans.

I have no illusions, however, about why I was able to work there for so long, for both men. It was because I was a popular card with the fans, not because Baba or Inoki liked me. In fact, I'm not sure they did. Japanese wrestlers had always been resentful of how they were treated by American promoters, primarily because most promoters used them as Oriental villains. The Japanese performers who came to America knew they wouldn't get a break or be allowed to win their matches, which hurt them with the fans back home because they knew the Japanese press was paying attention. When Baba first came to the States, I wrestled him twice and won both matches. It was the same thing with another Japanese star named Seiji Sakaguchi, a former judo champion who was closely aligned with Inoki (he was billed as "Big Saka" in the U.S.). I faced him twice and beat him both times. The Japanese promoters had me back many times, but I never believed they were happy to have to me there. If it hadn't been for the fans, who have been wonderful to me, I doubt I would have continued to go.

I have nothing but warm memories of Rikidozan, though. During the six years that we were business associates, he brought me to Japan several times, and every trip was a pleasure. Riki treated me with great courtesy and respect, and he never tried to cheat me out of a dime. I can't necessarily say all of those things about his successors.

Endnotes, Chapter 13

Chapter 14

When I returned from Japan in October 1957, only a small handful of people — Ed Lewis, Sam Muchnick and the members of the National Wrestling Alliance's championship committee — had any idea that I was about to become the NWA's ex-heavyweight champion. I had notified Sam by letter from Australia that I'd had enough. "You can have your belt back," I told him, "just as soon as I fulfill my dates with Rikidozan."

Given what happened to me in Australia and Singapore, maybe it seems like a stupid decision to become a free-lancer. To be honest, that was what was running through my mind when I headed for Japan after the unpleasantries in Australia and Singapore. What I found there eased my concerns, though, and reassured me that I'd made the correct choice. Riki didn't care whether I had the NWA title or not. It was my reputation that counted with him and the fans, and he definitely wanted me back. Europe also looked very promising. Ed Lewis had been in touch with some influential people there who said they'd be happy to book me, so I was anxious to end matters with the NWA.

I admit I couldn't resist gloating a bit when I got back to the States and sat down with Sam to discuss what we were going to do with the title. Sam and the NWA had sold me to Riki for the Japan tour for $10,000, and I had protested when I learned about the deal. "That's crazy," I told them. "We could get $25,000 … $10,000 for me and $15,000 for the NWA." They were afraid

to ask for that much money, though, so they went ahead and made the deal.

"You people are giving away the store," I told Sam when I returned. "Remember when I told you that $10,000 was too cheap a price for the booking? Well, even Rikidozan admitted as much. Let me show you what he's paying me to come back over there next year." I stuck a piece of paper under Sam's nose and grinned as I watched him read the bottom line: Riki was paying me $50,000 for two matches, and I wouldn't be splitting it with the NWA. Or anyone.

"That's the kind of money you guys are passing up," I said when Sam had finished looking over the contract. "The NWA has got a lock on this business, but you people are running it like small-timers. It's more important to your members to have the champion working tank towns for a $50 payoff and not even recovering his expenses, when he could be out there making this kind of money. That's why I'm giving you back your title."

I guess you could call it rubbing salt in an open wound. Relations between Sam and me had become so strained by then that neither of us was interested in trying to smooth things over. Sam wanted me out of his hair, as far as the NWA was concerned, and I was anxious to get to Europe. Things went smoothly during the three or four weeks I was in the States. I only wrestled a handful of dates, and no one called me at home, begging me to do them any favors.

Sam and the championship committee had huddled together while I was making my Far East tour. By the time I returned, they had decided whom they wanted as the new champion: Buddy Rogers. Given that Rogers was easily one of the top two or three attractions in the business, it was a sensible choice, and putting the belt on him would probably draw some very big houses.

I refused to do it, though. I hadn't changed my attitude about Rogers and wasn't about to give the belt to him. The NWA couldn't do anything about

it, either. I told Sam that if he insisted on making the match, then I'd just go out there and beat Rogers straight-up, which wouldn't have been any chore. I had too much respect for myself and the wrestlers who'd worn the belt in the past to give it to a performer, especially one I'd never cared for personally. "If you want the belt back," I said to Sam, "get me a wrestler."

They finally came up with someone acceptable to me: "Cowboy" Dick Hutton. He was 34 years old and probably at his peak after several years as a pro. It would have been hard for the NWA to come up with someone better, in fact, because Hutton was one of the saltiest wrestlers I ever knew. His amateur record was incredible: undefeated as a heavyweight through four years of college at Oklahoma A&M in the 1940s and the NCAA's national champion in his freshman, sophomore, and junior years. He would have won the tournament in his senior year, too, but he lost to Verne Gagne when the referee reversed his opinion and Dick's coach refused to appeal it.

I became a Dick Hutton fan the moment I saw him, and I loved it when I was booked with the guy because we'd actually wrestle each other during our matches, just for fun. That was one of the advantages of being able to actually wrestle; you could have your fun and get paid for it, too. It was a breath of fresh air for all of us who had the skills and I always looked forward to wrestling the boys who knew their wrestling.

Hutton was a special situation, though, because he may have been the best mat wrestler of all time. I've seen a lot of wrestlers, amateurs and pros alike, who were fast on their feet and quick on takedowns, but once they hit the deck they were lost. Hutton was completely at home on the mat and it was an incredible thing to see because he was built like a chunk of reinforced concrete. He looked like he would be stiff and slow, but the guy was so fast and mobile that he could almost float. He was like a python — no matter what kind of move you made, he would have a counter for it.[42]

Obviously, I was only too happy to lose the NWA title to a wrestler the caliber of Dick Hutton, so the match was set, for November 14, 1957, in Toronto. Hutton and I wrestled slightly more than 35 minutes in front of more than 10,000 fans and a nationwide television audience. When I submitted to his abdominal stretch hold, the place exploded in shock. The fans who half an hour earlier had booed when Hutton was introduced — he had been working Toronto for a while as a semi-heel — forgot their displeasure and joined in the applause. They had just seen something that all sports fans love: an upset, an unknown beating the champion. It was an irresistible story for the sports reporters, too. In all modesty, I had been one of the top stars in pro wrestling for years and a familiar face to a lot of people because of television, so news of Hutton's victory over me made the sports sections of a lot of newspapers in North America and Japan.

I couldn't have been happier about the way things worked out. I also was pleased that we

were able to work out something for Ed Lewis. The old man was a prideful devil, but I wanted to be sure the NWA took care of him. Hutton solved my problem by saying he would be proud to have Ed in his corner as his manager and publicist, the same things he had done for me, and there were two or three friendly NWA members who were influential enough to make sure Ed continued to get his three percent.

Two weeks after the title switch, my wife and I boarded the luxury liner S.S. United States and headed for Europe. My plan was to make it a long working vacation — I'd wrestle for a week to make enough money to cover our expenses, and then take a week off to see the Continent. Ed Lewis had put me in touch with the top promoters in London and Paris, and they were happy to arrange bookings on that basis. I even created a title for myself — International heavyweight champion — just so I would have a belt around my waist when I got there.

Our destination was Le Havre, France, where we'd disembark and head for Paris, but about halfway across the Atlantic, I got a cable saying we should continue on to Southampton, England. The promoter in London, Jack Dale, had booked me on the night of December 11 — our arrival date, in fact — at the Lord Albert Hall with Europe's biggest star, Dara Singh, the British Empire champion, and it was too important a booking to pass up. For one thing, the Lord Albert Hall was one of the premier auditoriums in the world, the English equivalent of Carnegie Hall, and whatever was staged there had instant credibility.

A couple of wrestlers met us when we got off the boat at Southampton and drove us into London to our hotel, the Grosvenor House on Hyde Park, one of the grand old hotels of Europe. Once we checked in, I grabbed my wrestling gear and headed for the Lord Albert Hall, where I sat down immediately with the promoter to discuss what we would do.

I hadn't met Dara Singh before that night, but I had already heard a lot about him during my tour of the Far East earlier that year. A Sikh, he was an authentic wrestler, was superbly conditioned — he did a couple of thousand Hindu squats every day — and he had a great reputation as a performer. He was a handsome guy, too, and he had capitalized upon his success as a wrestler to become a popular movie star in India.

I had also heard he was a sharp and very objective businessman when it came to wrestling, and I was pleased to see for myself that it was true. His British Empire title had credibility throughout Europe, India, Pakistan, Canada and Australia, and I'd seen enough large egos in the business that it wouldn't have surprised me if he had insisted on winning that night. But Dara was smart enough to see real value further down the road for us — not only in England but elsewhere — if we wrestled to a draw, which was what the promoter had in mind. And that's what we did. (Pro wrestling in Europe was staged like a

boxing match, with the wrestlers working rounds. Dara and I wrestled six 10-minute rounds that night, winning a fall apiece.)

It couldn't have gone much better for us that night. The Lord Albert Hall was packed, the audience was enthusiastic, and Dara was a pleasure to wrestle. I was doing more flying moves at the time than he was accustomed to seeing, but he handled them instinctively. I could see immediately that he was a good wrestler, which usually made me cautious, but he was following through with each move just enough to let me know that he was an accomplished pro, so I relaxed and enjoyed myself. The result was a very good match, as credible as they come, especially the late rounds when we really stepped up the pace (I'd spent the first part of our match sweating out a lot of the wine I'd consumed coming over on the United States), and I left the ring that night a very happy man.

The night was memorable for another reason

because it was the first time I heard the name Bert Assirati, a man some wrestling fans believe may have been the toughest wrestler of them all. As Dara and I were headed for the ring, I noticed a commotion about 100 feet away from the ring. Tthe Bobbies had surrounded a stocky fireplug of a man and were trying to escort him out of the building. I figured it was a security problem because I'd heard backstage that the Queen might be in attendance — in fact, one entire tier, about 3,000 seats, was always reserved at Royal Albert Hall for the royal family and their guests, and those seats were indeed full that evening — so I didn't pay much attention.

In the dressing room afterwards, I learned the cause of the disturbance was Assirati, an English wrestler with a reputation as a very dangerous man. When the Bobbies stopped him, he had been trying to get into the ring to publicly challenge Dara to a contest for the British Empire title. His dislike of Dara was obviously a subject of great interest in London, too, because the next morning's

newspapers carried stories about the episode.

The day after the match, I sat down with Jack Dale and the other members of the promotional group — there were five of them in all — to discuss my future matches and line up viable opponents. Dara and I had scored a public-relations triumph with our match, and I was anxious to build on it as quickly as possible. The promoters, however, said they had only one opponent for me: Dara Singh. Well, we'd just wrestled a draw and it was too soon for a rematch, so there wasn't much left to do. We badly needed another strong wrestler to keep things rolling, but the promoters insisted there was no one else around.

Based on what I'd heard in the dressing room the night before, Assirati sounded like the obvious solution. He was supposed to be a top-flight wrestler, a graduate of the famous hooker's school in Wigan, and he had a following in England among fans who knew their wrestling. A couple of

boys in the dressing room the night before had even insisted he was the best they'd ever seen. "So what about him?" I asked the promoters.

It was immediately obvious that the promoters and Assirati were old enemies because they wouldn't even consider it. No one ever said anything to help me understand what the problems were, so I concluded it was probably just another case of promoters disliking a guy because they couldn't control him. Still, he seemed like the logical choice, and I continued to argue in favor of him for a couple of days. The promoters simply wouldn't listen, though. "That bloody bastard," they'd say, waving their arms in dismissal. "We don't even want to talk to him."

I became even more persuaded that Assirati was the man, however, because I continued to talk to other wrestlers about him, and what I'd heard was nothing but awe for the guy's ability. I became convinced that the three of us — Assirati, Dara Singh and myself — could wrestle some great

matches for big houses all over Europe and Asia, so I decided to approach him on my own. I sent word to him through some other wrestlers, urging him to contact me, assuring him that our conversation would be absolutely confidential, strictly between the two of us.

I never heard a single word from the guy, which disappointed me tremendously, and not just for business reasons. I could understand he might not be interested in talking to anyone associated with the promotional group, but I couldn't understand why he would refuse the invitation of a fellow athlete, if for no other reason than to find out what was on his mind. It was discourteous, which said a lot to me about Assirati. He obviously wasn't a businessman. He let his ego and pride get in the way of making money, which means his talent was a waste.

Does Assirati deserve to be remembered as one of the greatest wrestlers of all time? I'm not in any position to say because I never saw him

wrestle. In fact, the only time I ever saw him was that night at Lord Albert Hall. He was obviously very good and very tough — he was only 5-foot-6, but he weighed 280 pounds, and I'm told it was all muscle — and I've talked with wrestlers who say he was one of the best they'd ever faced.

But I've also talked with wrestlers who worked out with Assirati and had little or no trouble with him. These same wrestlers say he earned his reputation as a dangerous wrestler by doing things like "accidentally" head-butting on the break, or knocking teeth loose with an "accidental" elbow. He was notorious for hooking and hurting opponents when they were supposed to be performing. Of course, those are the same sort of tactics Frank Gotch employed during his career, and they haven't kept him from appearing on a lot of all-time-best lists, so maybe Assirati belongs in the club. It's one thing to be a great gymnasium wrestler, though, and another thing altogether to make money at it. He may have succeeded at the one, but he was definitely a flop at the other.[43]

It still pains me today to think about what Assirati passed up, but maybe it wouldn't have worked out, anyway. An active wrestler since the 1920s, including some appearances in the United States in the early 1930s, he had to retire only three years after that 1957 episode in London due to accumulated ring injuries, a price many of us paid by staying in the game for so long. He ended up a cripple, blind in one eye and walking with two canes because he had all of his knee and ankle joints fused together. He died in 1990 at age 82.

During the next several months, I wrestle a lot of dates all over England, but the promoters could never come up with an opponent the caliber of Dara Singh, so business was only average. But it was an educational experience, one that convinced me promoters were pretty much the same the world over. Many of the English promoters were thieves and curve artists, and they couldn't have cared less about the welfare of their athletes.

One trip I made to a northern coal-mining town

was typical. I rode up in a lorrie which carried the ring and the wrestlers, sitting up front on a little three-legged stool with a cold rain blowing in the broken side windows. When we stopped in a little village for gas, the wrestlers bailed out of the back and entered a little pub, where they bought their evening meal — cold meat sandwiches. I'd seen some tough times myself over the years, especially during the Depression, but these poor people were literally living like animals.

When we finally got to the town, the promoter met me at the entrance. He acted very cool and distant. He followed me into the dressing room and stood looking me over silently for several moments. Finally, he spoke up. "Are you fit?" he asked, meaning, was I in condition for a contest?

I replied that I wasn't in top condition, but could probably handle myself in a pinch.

"Well, you may have to actually wrestle tonight," he said. I was booked with the town's local hero,

who was supposed to have a reputation.

"If that's what you want for your town, okay," I replied. A contest would have been terrible, of course, but I'd seen by then how he treated the talent and wasn't particularly interested in whether he ruined his business.

Of course, I had to act like a smartass. As he was leaving, I said, "You know, come to think of it, a contest is a good idea, I haven't seen a real wrestler since I wrestled Dara Singh" — which was true — "and I could use the workout, so bring him on."

The promoter came back to my dressing room several minutes later and announced that his boy had changed his mind and decided he would rather work the match. I told him I didn't care one way or another. I had decided to wrestle his man regardless, and that I was going to pin him quickly … which is exactly what I did.

The following day, back in London, I had lunch with Jack Dale, and he asked me off-handedly how I had gotten along with the promoter up north. "Oh, fine," I said. "The match went well. There were no problems."

He looked surprised. "No problems?" he asked.

"That's right — no problems," I replied. Dale had obviously known ahead of time that the promoter was going to try something, and he hadn't warned me. I wasn't going to dignify their crap by playing along and leaving him with the impression that I could be annoyed.

The Continent was a better situation. I was actually seeking international recognition as a wrestler and Europe was the place to get it because it had a long tradition in the sport. The fans were savvy about pro wrestling, and didn't buy the moves which obviously required cooperation or the carnival stuff that was already beginning to dominate the American scene. Since

I'd always relied on authentic wrestling moves and holds as my "gimmick," it was a perfect situation for me. I just discarded most of the American stuff from my repertoire and focused on what I loved the most: wrestling!

Paris became my base of operations. I settled into the routine I'd planned — one week of wrestling dates followed by one week off. Alex Goldstein, an old friend of Ed Lewis' who promoted almost everything in Europe — circuses, boxing, wrestling — handled my bookings, arranging dates for me in France, Switzerland, and Belgium. Once a month, I'd hop a flight in Zurich and fly to London for some dates, which usually included a big show at the Lord Albert Hall, or an even bigger place, Harringay Arena.

It was a grand time. I had a lot of show-business friends who were working in Europe at the time at places like the Lido Club in Paris, a wonderful nightspot, and they always saw to it that we were treated royally. I'd become friends with some

great wrestlers, so there was usually plenty of pleasant company around when it came to making wrestling dates or simply playing. There was plenty to see and do, especially when one could afford to travel first-class, and I was never bored.

I had some very lucrative dates — in Paris, for instance, at the 10,000-seat Palais des Sport — and I was making a couple of thousand dollars a week, but I could also see that the business was really going nowhere. That was too bad because Europe had a chance to become the hot wrestling market that Japan became. It simply didn't work out, primarily because there was a very limited pool of talent. The fans were too well-educated about wrestling to accept anything not presented credibly. Once I had worked with the good wrestlers, like Dara Singh, Felix Miquet, Frank Valois, Andre Drapp and a couple of others, there was no one left with any credibility. We could change the matchups — and we did — but that soon got stale. One promoter brought over a group of American wrestlers, thinking they'd be popular

with the fans, but it happened to be a group of boys who were very poor wrestlers, and once they got into the carnival stuff that was popular in the States — and was really all they could do — the fans quit coming.

Another wrestler who could sense the business would never develop into anything worthwhile in Europe was Felix Miquet. He was a hell of an athlete and a great-looking guy — 6-foot-3, 260 pounds — who had all the tools. He had become a very competent pro wrestler years earlier in the United States — I'd actually booked him in St. Louis a couple of times — and then returned to France where he had resumed his career as the country's top wrestling star. By the time I began wrestling there, however, he had decided to get out of the profession and become a cognac distributor (which he did, and he became a very wealthy man in the process).

I was scheduled to defend my International title against Felix in the main event at the Palais des

Sport, a match we knew would do enormous business. Felix had a reputation similar to mine, of not making anyone look better than they actually were. We both had good careers and strong wrestling backgrounds, and neither of us had to do anything we didn't choose to do. I was willing to give him the match — after all, he was the home team, so to speak — but he declined.

"No," he said, "you're clearly the better wrestler, so I don't mind if you win. Besides, I'm getting out of this. A loss won't hurt me, and it'll help you. If you were smart, though, you'd look around for something else, too, because this business is going nowhere in Europe."

I really appreciated his attitude about our match, and so did the promoter, because it helped us down the line. We shouldn't have been surprised. Felix was an unusually considerate and kind man in a lot of respects, especially within our industry. One night in Bordeaux after Felix and I had wrestled a match, we attended a party at a fine

restaurant owned by the promoter. It was held upstairs in a private dining room and we arrived to find the place was wall-to-wall women. Felix selected the homeliest-looking woman in the place and spent the entire evening with her, drinking wine and talking, until about three in the morning, when we had to leave to catch the train back to Paris. Once we were settled in our compartment, I asked Felix how he had ended up with such a plain-looking woman.

"Well, my friend," he said, "we have the good life, you and I. The world is our oyster, and we take and take. Sometimes it is good if we give."

It was impossible not to be impressed by someone like that, so I gave plenty of thought to what Felix had said about getting out of pro wrestling. By the early part of 1958, I had decided he was right. I had plenty of money put away, I felt like I had nothing left to prove in the wrestling game, and I had fallen in love with Europe. I was living in Switzerland at the time, skiing every day

during my off weeks, and had become good friends with my ski coach, Alfredo Naegeli, a Hungarian-German like myself. He said there was a good opportunity for us in the ski equipment business, and the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea.

I would have done it, too, if it had been easier. However, Alfredo and I soon learned we couldn't do business in Switzerland until I became a citizen, which involved a five-year waiting period. I could have earned a living wrestling around Europe while I waited, but I'd already seen the business there would never amount to much in terms of real money, certainly not when compared with the big bucks I could earn in the States. I was already leaning towards heading home when Fredda tore up a knee skiing, and that settled the matter. She needed surgery, and since I knew several top orthopedic surgeons in the States, that's where we headed.

Endnotes, Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Sitting at home was the last thing on my mind when we returned to the States in 1958. I could have retired — my home in St. Louis was paid off, I had at least half a million in the bank, and I had some good investments that were paying off — but I had already decided that, since I couldn't retire in Europe, I would simply continue doing what I had been doing.

It was an easy decision to make. I was only 42 years old and hadn't lost a step as a wrestler. If anything, I was probably better than ever because of the months I'd spent in Europe working mostly with authentic wrestlers. I was spoiled, too, by 20 years of stardom — I loved the spotlight, the travel, the satisfaction of performing in front of a good wrestling crowd, and the competition in the gymnasium. I was ready to hit the road from the moment I got back, so I put out the word I was

available.

It was a very nice period in my career, primarily because I controlled it myself and didn't have to split my fee with anybody. Eddie Quinn in Montreal and Frank Tunney in Toronto were my contacts. If a promoter was interested in my services, he would call one of them and they would call me. My fee was the same as it had been when I had been the NWA champion: 10 percent of the after-tax gate plus travel expenses, and it wasn't negotiable. I only worked when and where I wanted, usually in places where I had good friends and could get in some fishing, like Oregon, Texas, and Canada.

Japan became especially important for me during that period. I could make a couple of tours each year, wrestling Riki and his top boys, and pick up several thousand dollars each trip while not having to lay out a dime in expenses. I was able to fatten my pocket in another way, too, because I had been smart enough to bring my International title back

from Europe, and Riki wanted it.

I'm proud to say I actually made the International title mean something, too, especially in Japan. Of course, the U.S. promoters helped. Since they couldn't have the NWA champion every week, they were only too happy to promote the International title when I appeared for them. In places like Texas and California, the title became a very credible one.

It was Japan, though, where the title carried the most weight. Riki coveted it, reasoning that a major title would only enhance his superstar status at home, and he knew he wasn't about to make a deal with the NWA for their belt. So Riki and I set up a tour that began with him beating me for the International title in Los Angeles. When he returned to Japan, I was hot on his heels, trying to regain what I'd lost. That tour did enormous business and enriched both of us.

It was a loose-as-a-goose life, and I loved

it. One day, though, late in 1962, I got a call from Sam Muchnick that changed everything. In the five years since I'd dropped the NWA title to Dick Hutton, the belt had passed from Hutton to Pat O'Connor, in 1959, and from O'Connor to Buddy Rogers in 1961. Rogers was a bigger card than ever, which was really saying something, but he had gotten crosswise by then with the NWA members by aligning himself with my old enemy, Toots Mondt. Toots and his partners in the New York wrestling office had taken control of Rogers' bookings and were using him almost exclusively in their territory, which meant Rogers was available to the other NWA promoters for only a small handful of dates each month.

"We're in a tight spot here, and we trust you," Sam said to me. "Would you be willing to wrestle Buddy Rogers in Toronto?"

I replied that I would be willing to wrestle Rogers anywhere because we had always made good money together. "What do you have in

mind?" I asked.

"Well, we'd like you to take the title again," Sam said. "Toots controls Rogers now, and he's seeing to it that we can't even use our own champion."

I had verbally abused Sam years earlier for taking Toots and his New York partners into the NWA. Their territory was so large and so lucrative that they didn't really need the Alliance. They had gone their own way for years, and I figured — correctly, it turned out — that they probably wouldn't even acknowledge their NWA affiliation with their fans. I could only think of one reason why they'd be interested in joining, and that was to cause trouble. And now, sure enough, here it was. It was obvious what Toots and his partners had in mind: They were planning to create their own heavyweight champion by depriving the NWA of its titleholder.

Sam's offer appealed to my ego, which was always pretty large. I certainly didn't need the

money — at the time, I could pick up 10 grand a week just by working Montreal, Toronto and Buffalo — but the idea of having the NWA belt around my waist once more was irresistible. Sam sweetened the deal by saying I wouldn't have to post a cash bond, so I agreed.

Getting Rogers into the ring for the match proved to be a real chore. He didn't want to lose the title, and he knew that once he got into the ring with me, he would have no choice about it, so he did exactly what I expected him to do — he ran. The first time Sam made the match, Rogers cancelled at the last minute, claiming he was injured. Sam rescheduled it — and again, Rogers "got hurt" and cancelled out. Finally, after Sam had scheduled the match for a third time, he called Rogers and gave him the bottom line. "If you back out again, your money" — meaning the $25,000 in cash that Rogers had deposited with the NWA when he won the belt from Pat O'Connor — "is going to be donated to charity, and I'm not kidding," Sam said.

That did the trick. The match was set for January 24, 1963, in Toronto, and Rogers showed up. Backstage, before we went on, Sam approached him with his money, $25,000 in $100 bills. "Look, you're working for Toots and McMahon now, and I know you must have a good relationship with them, so why don't I let them hold the money until after the match?" he said.

Rogers, however, apparently held the same opinion of Toots and McMahon that I did because he was emphatic they were not to get their hands on his money. "No way," he said to Sam. "You, I trust. You hold on to it." A funny way to feel about one's partners, huh?

Our match was nothing memorable, just the sort of thing I'd come to expect over the years from Rogers when he was trapped. We only went 15 minutes and one fall, long enough to give the fans some action and accomplish what I wanted.[44]

That was the beginning of a three-year run with

the NWA title, my last one, and I have to say it was a lot more comfortable than any of my previous stints. My relationship with the NWA membership was better than before because I was doing them a big favor by replacing Rogers, and also because I'd been proven right on several issues we'd argued about earlier, so I didn't have the hassles I'd had in the past. Except for not having to put up a deposit on the belt, it was an identical deal to what I'd had in the past — three weeks on, one week off — and the Alliance pretty much stuck to the agreement. Sam did try a few times to pull that old "extenuating circumstances" stunt with me, trying to get me to wrestle some dates on my off week, but I wasn't going down that road again.

It was an interesting period in pro wrestling. I was almost 47 years old when I won the title again, and many of my contemporaries had already retired or were headed in that direction, so there were lots of new faces around. Some great wrestlers arrived on the scene during this time — most notably, Danny Hodge, who won the NCAA

wrestling title and the Golden Gloves boxing title in the same year while a student at the University of Oklahoma; Jack Brisco, a handsome American Indian out of Oklahoma State who had Dick Hutton-like credentials; and Billy Robinson, a tough English wrestler who had learned his trade at the famous hookers' school in Wigan.

Hodge, Brisco, and Robinson were rarities, however. One could almost describe them as freaks, in fact, because actual wrestling skills had become even less important than before. The door had opened wider than ever for performers and characters, and the in-the-ring product had come to resemble brawling more than sport, something the promoters defended by saying they were only giving the fans what they wanted.

Another important change since my last stint with the title had been the creation of two super-promotions, the American Wrestling Association [AWA] and the World Wide Wrestling Federation [WWWF], each with its own version of the world

heavyweight title. Unlike the NWA, however, the champions of the AWA and the WWWF did not tour outside their territories. It's putting too fine a point on it, perhaps, but they were "company" champions. Each organization did extremely well within its area, though, persuading their fans that their version of the title was the "real" one.

I have to claim some of the responsibility for the creation of the modern AWA title (not to be confused with Paul Bowser's longtime ballyhoo title name). In 1951, Buddy Rogers skipped out, abruptly, on his manager, Jack Pfefer, and Pfefer had retaliated by printing up fliers branding Rogers as a fake. Pfefer hired people to post the fliers wherever Rogers was working. Rogers became so harried that, one night after we worked together in St. Louis, he told me he might have to leave the country, just to get out of Pfefer's reach. We were never what you would describe as friends, but I respected Rogers as an attraction, so I called Eddie Quinn in Montreal and arranged some bookings for him there. I owed Eddie, and I

figured Rogers would be good for him. I was right, too, because Rogers was, as usual, an immediate hit.[45]

About six months later, I arrived in Montreal for a booking to find I was booked with Rogers. Eddie Quinn and his partner, Yvon Robert, wanted me to lose to Rogers, but I would only agree to a draw. That didn't satisfy Eddie and Yvon, though, and they continued to press me over the years whenever I was in Montreal — I was in and out of there regularly at the time — to give Rogers that credibility.

Finally, in early 1957, after an all-day drinking party in which the primary goal was to soften me up, Yvon Robert sat me down and tried once more to persuade me. I was willing by then to help stimulate their territory, just to settle them down, so I told him, "Look, you need to understand one thing: This guy is never going to beat me. I'll promote someone for you, though, because you and Eddie are good friends — but not Rogers. Find me

somebody else."

So they came up with Edouard Carpentier, a muscular performer who was popular with the French-speaking fans in Montreal because they believed his publicity, which said he was French. Well, he was French born, but to Russian and Polish parentage. His real name was Edouard Ignacz Weiczorkiewicz. When Eddie Quinn discovered him, he was actually an acrobat who was working in a bottom-of-the-barrel circus in Paris. Eddie saw potential in the guy and arranged to teach him some basic wrestling moves. He brought him to Montreal, renamed him — after the famous French boxer of the 1920s, Georges Carpentier — and gave him a strong marketing push.

He was accepted by the fans almost immediately, doing mostly acrobatic stuff, and rapidly became a hot attraction. I was happy to help Eddie and Yvon boost him even higher, mainly because it would shut them up about Rogers, so we worked

out a match. A couple of months later, in June 1957, Eddie was able to line up a card at the Chicago Stadium, which was in promoter Fred Kohler's territory. Eddie had never gotten along with Kohler and was always looking for a way to sting him, and running opposition matches in Kohler's own town was a pretty good way to do it. Eddie called and said it was time. He asked me if I'd wrestle Carpentier again, in the main event, and I said sure. We did essentially the same match we had done in Montreal, which really made Carpentier popular with the Chicago fans.

Meanwhile, Gagne was putting together the pieces of a large wrestling territory in the upper Midwest, beginning with Tony Stecher's old promotion in Minneapolis, which he had purchased. One of the wrestling offices that eventually came on the market was Kohler's, and Verne — who had always done well in Chicago as a wrestler — snapped it up. Since Carpentier was drawing well there as "the uncrowned world champion," Verne decided to leave well enough

alone for a while. It was no big deal to me because the outcome wasn't recognized by the NWA as a title switch; only in Chicago and a couple of other places was Carpentier recognized as champion.

In August 1958, though, Verne won Carpentier's "title" for himself — which is what he had planned to do all along — in Omaha, another one of the towns he had added to his territory. Two years later, after claiming the NWA would not give him a shot at its title (probably because he never asked), he formally announced the creation of the American Wrestling Association and its own version of the heavyweight championship, which he just happened to be holding. In time, Verne's promotion had a lock on pro wrestling in the upper Midwest, the Rocky Mountain states, and parts of Canada.[46]

The New York-based WWWF came on the scene in 1963 after Buddy Rogers lost the NWA title to me. I know none of the background to its creation,

only that Toots Mondt and Vince McMahon Sr. had been planning it for some time, certainly as far back as the previous year when they began withholding Rogers from other NWA promoters. Maybe they thought they could simply steal the NWA title by stealing Rogers.

My guess is they decided to create their own title when Sam and the NWA forced Rogers into meeting me. At the time they were doing big business in the big Eastern cities like New York, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, D.C, and Boston, plus virtually all of New England, the greater New York City area, and south to northern Virginia. Their up-and-coming star was a young Italian-born weightlifter named Bruno Sammartino, and they probably planned on having Rogers lose the NWA belt to Sammartino at some point. It's also my guess that Rogers refused because he didn't want to lose his $25,000 deposit with the NWA, so they merely waited until after the title changed hands in Toronto before announcing the creation of their own title.

Rogers was the WWWF's first heavyweight champion, but he only defended the title once, and his reign lasted exactly 47 seconds. He had returned to the East Coast after our title match and worked several dates for the New York office when, a couple of months after the switch, he was hospitalized with a serious heart condition. That's where he was when Toots Mondt and Vince McMahon Sr., booked him with Sammartino for the WWWF title, on May 17, 1963, at Madison Square Garden. The bastards literally dragged Rogers out of a hospital bed, took him to the Garden, put the new belt around his waist, and sent him into the ring for the quick pin. It happened so fast — in less than a minute — that the fans figured Sammartino was simply the much better man, but the result was actually planned to require minimal exertion from Rogers, who went right back into the hospital after the match. That was effectively the end of Rogers' long career, although he did come out of retirement a couple of times in the late 1960s and, again, in the late 1970s for a few matches. Fortunately, Rogers had put away a lot of

money during his career and he didn't need to work.[47]

Sammartino became an enormous star in the Northeast, and fans there today still think of him as one of the greatest pro wrestlers of all time. That's one of the advantages of being based in New York, which is still the news media center of the world. Whatever the New York media believe — and they're just as gullible as their public — is what's presented as the truth, and they certainly believed in Sammartino. In truth, he was a very limited performer with almost no real wrestling knowledge. His in-the-ring work was limited pretty much to strength moves and brawling. He never became a star outside of his territory, but within that area, he was the absolute king, the "Living Legend," as he was called, and his success had a lot to do with an incredible personal charisma. He was a genuinely nice guy, too, respected by his colleagues who didn't happen to be wrestlers, and he projected sincerity and intensity, which made him a very believable

performer.

I had done what I could over the course of my career to create a situation where there was one recognized world heavyweight wrestling champion, so it probably seems obvious that I was distressed about the creation of rival titles in the AWA and the WWWF. The truth, however, is that I pretty much shrugged it off and went my own way. I figured a large part of the blame for the situation fell on the NWA itself, which had not exactly shown strong leadership and business savvy over the years. It could have consolidated its hold on the business during the 1950s, but it didn't, and that opened the door to rival operations. The members of the NWA's board of directors were appeasers. They hadn't learned that "an appeaser is one who hopes he will be eaten last." We had fought our way to the top, only to piss it away through weak negotiations. There simply wasn't much I could do about the multiple championships, so I was content to make my dates and earn as much money as I could. Besides, the

NWA title was still the most credible one in the business because it had been around longer and was recognized in most parts of the country, not to mention the world. It was so credible, in fact, that I defended it several times in both the AWA and the WWWF, with due recognition each time from the promoters.

Ironically, the one match I remember best from that three-year reign is one that never took place: a 1965 title-versus-title match between me and Bruno Sammartino. It would have united two of the three existing titles and made an awful lot of money for everyone involved if it had occurred, and I'm sorry it didn't. The only satisfaction I derive from thinking about it is that I once again — and for the final time, as it turned out — repaid Toots Mondt for the way he had treated me and all the boys almost 30 years earlier in southern California.

It was the New York swifties who suggested the match. They called Sam Muchnick and said they

wanted a meeting to discuss some mutual business, so Sam and I flew to Chicago to meet them — Toots, Vince McMahon Sr., and my old friend Frank Tunney, the promoter in Toronto, who was loosely affiliated with the New York office by then. There, in a suite at the Morrison Hotel, they made their pitch: a title-versus-title match between Sammartino and me at Madison Square Garden, with closed-circuit TV into another New York arena and as many other cities throughout North America that they could line up. Closed-circuit TV was still a fairly new thing in those days, used almost exclusively to televise big heavyweight boxing cards, but the New York people had researched it enough to believe we could make a million dollars from that alone. The live gate at the Garden, with jacked-up ticket prices, was probably good for another $200,000, they said.

As for the match itself, they wanted me to lose. In return, they said, Sam and I would get $25,000 in cash, in advance, as a sign of their personal guaranty that Sammartino would meet me

in a rematch within a year and drop the NWA title back to me. That was supposed to be our entire fee.

Sam was enthusiastic from the start, and he started to lobby me almost immediately in favor of making the match. I listened to all of this attentively, saying very little while I ran the numbers through my head. Finally, after a couple of hours, I agreed to do it — but only if they would meet my price.

First of all, I said I wanted $100,000 for myself, in advance — in other words, my usual 10-percent fee, from the supposedly "guaranteed" million-dollar gate from closed-circuit TV. I also wanted 10 percent of the Madison Square Garden gate, whatever it turned out to be, and I wanted it in cash the night of the match before I stepped into the ring. And finally, I said, I wanted three percent for Ed Lewis because he had done a fabulous job for the NWA and for wrestling in general over a long period of time, and he deserved to have a piece of

a record-breaking gate like the one we had been discussing.

Well, Toots and McMahon looked at each other in shock. They had figured the $25,000 cash guarantee for the rematch would be enough to satisfy us, but I saw it as an insult, and I said so. I could earn that much with the NWA title in two weeks, so it was worth a lot more than what they were willing to put up. That was the centerpiece of my calculations. The NWA belt was so valuable I figured Toots and McMahon had no intention of giving us the rematch. They'd probably just forfeit the money and keep the belt.

McMahon finally spoke up. "We shouldn't be required to put up that kind of money in advance," he said. "We ought to enter into this pact with mutual trust."

That was almost enough to make me laugh. Trust them? I knew enough about both of those people that I would have been a fool to not insist on my

money up front. "Those are my conditions," I said, "and I won't budge."

Toots stood up and said in a warm, sincere tone of voice, "Lou, I'd like to talk to you alone." The old fox could see that he had Sam convinced and that I was the only remaining hurdle.

We went into the bathroom, closed the door, and Toots started talking. "Look, Lou, we've had our differences over the years, and I know from my good friend Ed Lewis that you're not easily swayed once you make up your mind, but we're both reasonable adults. So, strictly between us, here's what I'll do if you go along with us: Immediately after the match, I'll personally give you a $25,000 bonus, out of my own pocket. And you can sleep on that."

I looked at him while he was talking, remembering those days in Los Angeles when he was paying us $10 a show and putting at least $5,000 in his pocket every week. I was

remembering, too, all the stories about his petty thefts, cons, and hustles. I couldn't stand being in the same room with the man.

"Toots," I said, when he finally stopped talking, "you don't have enough money in your pocket to pay for the coffee you've been drinking this morning. You want to know what you can do with your $25,000 bonus? You can write it on a stiff check, and then I'll tell you where you can stick it. This is a business deal, and if you and that other thief can come up with $125,000 in advance, then we'll do it. If you can't, then we won't. Meanwhile, keep your charming bullshit to yourself."

I turned around and walked out of the bathroom, leaving him standing there. Well, Sam could see immediately that I was hot, so he asked the group to excuse us for a moment. I knew he was angry with me, too, and I couldn't really blame him because he stood to make some real money from the deal.

When we were finally out of earshot of the others, he came right to the point he had decided to make. "Lou, I'm the president of the NWA, and you know that I can order you to take this match, so why not cooperate?"

"Yes, I know you can," I replied. "Well, go ahead and make it, and I promise you I'll be there."

That surprised him. "You will?" he said. "You mean you'll lose to Bruno?"

"No, Sam," I answered. "It only means that I'll do what you order me to do: I'll take the match. But I won't lose. It'll be a contest, and I'll simply go out there and beat him."

That really rocked him. "Now, wait a minute," he began, "we didn't agree ..."

"Sam, we haven't agreed to anything," I said, interrupting him. "If you want to order me to take this match with Sammartino, then I'll have to do it. What I'm telling you, though, is that I plan to

beat him. You know and they know, and I'm sure Sammartino knows, that I can do it, too. So go ahead and make the match. At least we'll come out of it with one less version of the world title to worry about, and unless you've been lying to me all these years, that's what we've been trying to accomplish."

Well, that was it, the end of the discussion. Sam could see I meant what I said, so we went back to the others and announced that it was no deal unless they agreed to the conditions I'd laid out. They couldn't go for that, though, so the match never took place, which was a shame, for everyone. I could have lost the NWA title to Sammartino and then worked up and down the East Coast for a year, picking up another $100,000 or $200,000 for myself in the process and building up the gate for the big rematch, if it ever took place. Sammartino and the New York office would have benefited, too, because the NWA belt would have given him even more credibility than he already had and opened the door to bookings outside of that one

territory, including Japan. They were just too small-time themselves to see it, I guess.[48]

I would have been perfectly comfortable taking the match, too, because Sammartino and I had already wrestled once before, and I could see then that he wasn't capable of giving me any problems. The match occurred on March 14, 1963, at the Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto, two months after I'd taken the NWA belt from Rogers and two months before Sammartino won the WWWF belt. I pinned him after 25 minutes.

Why they put us in there together is something that has always mystified me.[49] Sammartino was a very hot attraction at the time in Toronto and was obviously headed for even bigger things, so it made no sense to me why they put him in that situation in front of 9,000 fans. It sounds ludicrous, but maybe promoter Frank Tunney was worried Sammartino couldn't go the distance. When he came to my dressing room before the match and suggested a one-hour time-

limit draw, I agreed. "That's fine with me," I said, "but you'd better tell him to be prepared to go hard because I'm going to turn on the juice." Toronto had always been a good town for me, and I had no intention of looking bad out there. I didn't want to hurt Tunney's business, but I sure didn't want to look like I was protecting Sammartino, either.

Tunney and I were old friends and one-time partners in the St. Louis promotion, so I know he would have said something if he figured I was being pig-headed. But he didn't. He merely chewed on what I'd said for a few moments and then said, "Well, just go ahead and take him when you want." And that was that.

What seems likely to me now, after all these years, is that Sammartino had some heat with the New York office, and they may have told Tunney to humble him by matching him with me. Sammartino's relations with the office were never very good, I understand, even during the years when he was on top and making very big

money because he wasn't afraid to stand up for himself. In the early 1980s, after he had retired, he sued Vince McMahon Sr. — Toots Mondt had retired in 1969 — claiming he had been consistently stiffed on his payoffs over the years. The suit was settled out of court in 1984 after Vince Sr. died and his son had taken over the promotion. Sammartino returned to the promotion for a while as a color commentator on television and an occasional performer. He soon departed, though, and has never spoken warmly of those people — which is why I like and respect him.

It's funny how things work out. If we had been able to make the "title-versus-title" match with Sammartino, and if the New York office had followed through on the rematch, I would have won the NWA title a seventh time. We didn't, though, so I never got the chance. Not that it really mattered to me. I'd slowly built up friction again with Sam and some of the NWA members since winning the title from Buddy Rogers, for the same old reasons — they'd begun to ask me to work

during my off week, which I refused to do — and it was obvious by mid-1965 that they wouldn't grieve if I decided to quit. I'd had enough of them, too, so I decided to make everybody happy.[50]

At the NWA convention that year, someone tentatively suggested maybe it was time to vacate the title, and I shocked everyone when I agreed. I even had my successor in mind: Gene Kiniski, a hard-nosed, former pro football player in the Canadian Football League who had become an excellent performer and a big card as a brawler. I liked Gene a lot because he respected the profession and worked very hard to keep it credible. He also had a lot of bottom to him; although he was not a skilled wrestler, he liked to test himself whenever we wrestled together by actually challenging me for several minutes.

The NWA agreed Kiniski was a fine choice as champion, so I lost the title to Gene on January 7, 1966, in St. Louis. We did a number of rematches down the road, just to take advantage of the fans'

interest, but the actual loss was pretty much the end of my long association with the NWA. My relationship with Sam Muchnick had hit its all-time low when I'd faced him down over the title-versus-title match with Sammartino, and it was several years before we warmed to each other again.

As for the NWA membership, I got along fine with several of the individual promoters and continued to work for them in the coming years, but by then, I'd had my fill of the organization itself. It was an amicable divorce, in that both parties wanted out, and the amusing thing for me is that getting rid of me didn't mean the end of the NWA's problems with its champion. Gene Kiniski proved to be every bit as hard-headed and difficult — from the NWA's point of view — as I had been, and after three years with the title, he, too, had had enough of fighting for his payoffs and working on his off week. He happily resigned as champion, and so did some of the people who later wore the NWA belt.

I would have happier memories of 1966 and my return to free-lancing if that hadn't also been the year that we lost Ed Lewis. He was 76 years old by then, was fully retired, and was living in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with his fourth wife. I'd had some bookings in that territory in November 1965, so I spent almost all of my free time in his company. A couple of days before my last booking in Oklahoma, Ed suggested we get away together for a few hours, just for old times' sake. He said he wanted to drive to Oklahoma City the following morning and spend the day at the Skirvin Hotel, a fantastic, old apartment-hotel that had been one of our favorite stops in the days when we were traveling together. I would have done anything for that old man, so if a day trip to Oklahoma City would make him happy, I was only too happy to oblige.

Everybody at the Skirvin knew Ed on sight, so we didn't need a reservation. We checked in, ordered up some food, and spent the day talking. Actually, Ed did almost all of the talking,

reminiscing about his career, the people we'd known who were now gone, the good times we'd had. Late that afternoon, we checked out and drove back to Tulsa. That was the last time we spent any time together because I left the territory the next day.

I should have picked up on the fact that he wasn't doing well physically, but I didn't, not until several weeks later when I got word that he was very ill and had been hospitalized at the Veterans Hospital in Muskogee. That's when I realized he had probably sensed the end was near when he asked me to take him to Oklahoma City. I was scheduled to work some dates on the Florida circuit, so I stopped over in Tulsa en route and drove out to the hospital to see him.

He was asleep in a wheelchair when I walked into his room. He'd had a bad night, the doctors said, and they had sedated him shortly before I arrived. I had a flight to catch, so I left word where I could be reached that night and headed

back to the airport. That was the last time I saw him.

That night, in Tampa, I got a call from Jack Pfefer, the old Jewish-Russian promoter who had been such a colorful part of our business for so many years. He had dropped by the hospital to see Ed shortly after I'd been there, and the doctors had told him that Ed was fading fast. "Ed is really on the way out," Pfefer told me. "It would be good if you can get back here before he's gone." I told Pfefer I'd get back as soon as I could, but I didn't make it in time. Ed died in his sleep on August 7, 1966.

It's impossible for me to describe the depth of my feeling for the man. He was my idol, my mentor, my advisor, and my great friend. He loved life, and he lived his with such gusto; for every slice of bread that the average man ate, Ed ate a loaf. He created our profession on the strength of his abilities and his personality, and I was honored just to try to follow in his footsteps.

That last request of his, to go to Oklahoma City together for the day, lives in my memory like it was yesterday. Maybe he wanted to say something he couldn't express, but it doesn't matter. I'm sure now he realized he was dying, and it meant the world to me that he wanted to spend some of that time with me, rather than be with anyone else. I can't imagine anything he could have said that would have made that memory more important to me.

Endnotes, Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Dara Singh had been urging me to come to India and wrestle him ever since our December 1957 match at the Lord Albert Hall in London, but the timing never seemed quite right. I always had something else lined up and couldn't fit in the trip.

In late 1968, however, Dara called again and urged me to come over, and this time I agreed. I could sense some big paydays over there because the Indian newspapers and magazines had kept our 1957 match in London alive in the minds of the fans as one of Dara's greatest matches, and a rematch with one of the few men to ever wrestle Dara to a draw seemed like a sure-fire attraction. Besides, I was still the footloose gypsy I'd always been and I was curious about the country.

It would be hard to exaggerate how big a name Dara was in India. He was already a movie star and important sports figure when we first met, and he had become even bigger, almost an institution, in the years since then. His 1957 tour of England, in particular, had paid big dividends for him at home — newspaper photos of Dara meeting the Queen of England, lots of coverage of his British Empire title defenses — and he had returned to India to a hero's welcome. By the time I made my first trip over there — I was to make a second visit

in 1973 — he was one of the wealthiest men in the country and one of its largest landowners.

I was aware that, thanks to that earlier match with Dara, I already had a reputation in India, but I was floored when I arrived in Bombay and learned just how big it was. The publicity was incredible — newspaper photos and stories every day, movie newsreel crews following me around, huge 10-foot-by-10-foot posters of Dara and me plastered all over the city. Our match there was held in a soccer stadium and we drew 60,000 people. The fans way out in the boonies in the 25-cent seats were so far away they probably couldn't even see us in the ring.

The scene was even wilder at the second match, held a couple of weeks later in New Delhi at another soccer stadium. In fact, it was downright scary. Some sharpie had printed up a bogus set of tickets and sold them on the street. The stadium seated something like 50,000 people, and it didn't require a genius to figure out what had happened

when the place filled up and there were still thousands of people outside the gates, waving their tickets and demanding to be let in.

The police locked the gates, but the mob — and that's precisely what they'd become — started coming over the 15-foot-high walls on ladders they had found nearby. The cops were waiting for them, though, with bamboo poles weighted with lead at one end, and they were fracturing skulls left and right. I witnessed all this because the cops had also broken out the tear gas and the fumes forced us out of our dressing rooms. Dara and I figured we had to go ahead with the match or risk an even more dangerous situation, so we fought our way into the ring, did our thing as quickly as we could, and then got out of there.

India was unlike anything I have ever experienced. The poverty was appalling. People lived in absolutely shocking conditions and sanitation was a mystery to most of them. What was truly amazing was the sheer number of

them. At times, it seemed like the entire country was composed exclusively of beggars.

If India had a middle class, I can't say I saw much of it. It certainly had a wealthy class, though, and they lived like kings. I was used to first-class treatment in foreign countries by then, but I was left almost speechless with the lavish treatment I received in India. Rikidozan had always treated me as his special guest when I worked Japan, but Dara was more than a match, with a limo always waiting for me at the airport or train station, absolutely decadent hotel accommodations, signing privileges wherever I went, even a personal escort who steered me away from tourist traps and into shops and manufacturing plants where I could buy native goods and souvenirs at discounted prices. Once, Dara put me up at the Oberoi Hotel in New Delhi, which was nothing less than an international meat market for the world's wealthiest and most politically influential people. Nearly the entire hotel was occupied by embassy people, upper-crust residents of many

Third-World countries, and scores of spoiled, rich, bored society women looking for entertainment. I was like a kid let loose in an ice cream factory. No one ever treated me better than Dara Singh.

Naturally, there was a price for all this. Dara did not want to lose a match in his own country, so he expected me to do all the losing. I was happy to do it, though, because it was good for business. Winning was of little or no benefit to my career, and I wasn't really comfortable with the idea of how the Indian crowds would take Dara losing. Who was actually the better wrestler was something we never determined because it really didn't matter to either one of us. We were only interested in a quality product, and we certainly succeeded at that.

India became a very lucrative venue for me in the 1960s, and it was because of the warm friendship that developed between Dara and me. Like Europe, wrestling in India was a respected and

popular sport. For that matter, India's tradition was even older and richer, the source and subject of legends. One of the country's greatest heroes was a wrestler, a Pakistani named Ghulam Mohammed, who had adopted India as his home. He had wrestled all over Europe and North America during the early 1900s as the Great Gama, and people who saw him say he was one of the greatest of them all. He was so good that, in 1928, he was able to defeat the great Stanislaus Zbyszko in a straight contest in only 10 seconds, despite the fact he was already 50 years old. India's fans were educated to the real thing, not the American circus stuff, and my credentials as an authentic wrestler served me extremely well.

I couldn't have succeeded there otherwise, in fact, because some people tested me. Once, at a public gym in Bombay where I'd gone to work out, some cocky amateur approached me very aggressively and started saying some smartass things about American pro wrestlers and even about Dara. I figured I couldn't let the guy just

walk away because word that he had backed me down would soon be all over the gym, and probably even the city, before the day was through, so I decided I might as well spend the morning teaching him a lesson. After all, I'd had 35 years of experience by then with some pretty good shooters and hookers, so there wasn't anything the punk could teach me.

So I baited him. I agreed with him that a lot of American wrestlers were merely carnival clowns, and I even agreed with him that Dara Singh and his brother Randawar — who was a damned good wrestler and a big star himself — were probably frauds. I was trying to sucker the kid into a workout, and when I finally suggested we roll around together on the mat for awhile, he jumped at it like a trout hitting a fly.

I could have written the script for what he did because I'd been there many times myself. I started out feeding him my leg for a single-leg takedown, an old trick Ray Steele had taught me

many years before, and he went for it. I pulled my leg back and got behind the kid before he knew I was there. He tried everything in the book — sitouts, switches, escapes — but I'd nailed him. He was huffing and puffing inside of five minutes, and I could see that he had blown up, so I released him. "Nice workout, kid," I said, shaking his hand and trying to sound insincere about it.

A lot of people were watching us by then, easily a hundred or more, and the loudmouth could see he had lost face. When he said he wanted to go again, I agreed. This time, I started out by going for a double-leg takedown, but I did it almost in slow-motion, to give him time to grab me in a front headlock, also called a chancery, another sucker move. He bit on it, so I dropped to my knees, backed up and did a sitout, grabbing his wrist as I did so and turned it into a hammerlock, which I rammed home. I released him, patted him on the back, and let him up.

Now he was fuming, absolutely furious, which is

exactly what I wanted. I was ready for the coup de grace. He insisted on going once more, so we did. I fed him my head for Ed Lewis' old move, the side headlock, which is another sucker move only the uninitiated would go for. Sure enough, the kid grabbed for it, and I gave him the old reliable finisher, the Greco-Roman backdrop, right on his head. End of workout. We'd been wrestling on a thin mat over a concrete floor, and the backdrop knocked him silly. An experienced pro would have gone with the move and taken the weight on his shoulders, but this was an amateur who'd never seen the move, and he was gone from the moment he grabbed for my head.

I could read the kid and the crowd like a book. They were thinking: Here's this well-conditioned, 235-pound amateur, a well-known wrestler around the gym, and he can't handle this 50-year-old man — so maybe these pro wrestlers are the real thing. I worked the kid some more, patting him on the back and telling him he was a pretty good wrestler. "That hold," I explained to

him, "is a Greco-Roman backdrop, and I plan to use it on Dara Singh. Maybe I can beat him with it."

A couple of nights later, Dara and I wrestled together again, and I remembered to use the backdrop on him. Dara, of course, was a different matter. He took the move and came back to beat me. You can imagine how the kid's image of Dara Singh soared as a result, especially since he had taken that move and been knocked silly. And that was the whole point of our workout: to change this kid's attitude about me, Dara Singh, and pro wrestling. I can guarantee you, he told the story about the incident to anybody who would listen.

The Greco-Roman backdrop figured prominently in another match I had in India, one that took place on the 1973 tour. I was supposed to wrestle two guys on the same night, a ploy we'd decided upon to prove I was worthy of yet another rematch with Dara Singh. My first opponent was a man named Tiger Joginder Singh, who had a legendary

reputation among wrestlers as one of India's greatest in the early part of this century. He had been a great athlete in his day — I remembered Ed Lewis, who had once wrestled him, talking about him with obvious respect — but he had become an opium addict over the years.

It was a very sad thing to see. His reflexes were so dulled by the dope that he looked like he was swimming underwater. As a result, we almost had a devastating injury during our match. We had wrestled for a few minutes when he grabbed me in a headlock, and I responded by throwing him into the ropes. However, as he went into the ropes, he lost his balance and was headed over them for the concrete floor. I could see he had lost control and was going to land smack on his head, probably breaking his neck or fracturing his skull. Somehow, I managed to grab him by an ankle and pull him back into the ring. I figured we'd better end it before he hurt himself, so I gave him a Greco-Roman backdrop and pinned him.

Our match was a very short one because Joginder couldn't go very long, thanks to his drug habit. The announcer asked me if I would wrestle a substitute, and I agreed. Out of the dressing room came a guy who must have been seven feet tall, a rough-looking rawboned character, and he had a funny glint in his eye. I figured this character was going to try something, so I approached him carefully. Once we locked up, though, I could see he didn't know a thing about wrestling. The big goof was absolutely awful.

So I relaxed, which was a mistake. I fed the guy a headlock, just to give him something to do, and he went for it, dragging me into one of the corners. The ropes around the ring were bare of any covering, which can be a risky thing — you could get painful rope burns or a cut, which could easily get infected — and this stupid character proceeded to drag my face along them, for three or four feet. It peeled the skin right off and left my face a bloody mess.

I exploded like a rocket. I grabbed the jerk and gave him as authoritative a Greco-Roman backdrop as I'd ever given anybody. As he went over, I kicked out my feet to add momentum to the fall. The impact was so hard that the guy went straight into the hospital. And so did I, for treatment of my facial cuts, and I wore an ugly scar for several months.

The odd thing about that night is we couldn't have planned a better outcome. We were merely trying to build up publicity for a rematch between Dara and me, and we certainly got it that night. I'd beaten the legendary Tiger Joginder Singh in short order, and then I'd put this Indian giant in the hospital, all in less than 30 minutes. The matches had been the normal fare, but we ended up with more publicity that we would have gotten otherwise.

That episode was useful in another way, too. The promoters in India were very conservative and leery of trying any promotional

tactics. For them, it was literally a matter of making the matches, renting a venue, and then sending the wrestlers out to do their thing. I tried several times to persuade them to introduce some excitement into their matches, but they were afraid to try it. Once they saw the kind of publicity that my matches with Joginder Singh and the giant generated, however, they relaxed a little.

As a result, I was able to introduce a little American-style excitement. Dara called me to say business had hit a serious slump and that he could very much use my help, so I agreed to appear. Sure enough, the first night I wrestled Dara, the house was only about 25 percent full, a really bad sign when you consider what we had done on the earlier trip. I suggested to Dara that instead of me wrestling him every time, he should book me next with his brother Randawar. Dara was leery, but he agreed that anything was worth a try at that point.

In our match — we worked 10-minute rounds,

like we had in England — Randawar won the first fall. I came back and won the second fall with a Greco-Roman backdrop. He was so badly "injured" that he couldn't answer the bell for the third fall, so the officials suspended the match at one fall apiece since Randawar couldn't continue. I demanded that I be declared the winner, but the officials refused, saying the match would resume at a later date, once Randawar was fit to wrestle again. This was all worked out in advance because it gave me a chance to go to the newspapers and complain.

It was a big story in India, where Randawar seldom lost a match. I hit all the major newspapers, accusing them of protecting their national hero in their coverage, and I did interviews in which I bragged about how Randawar couldn't withstand the Greco-Roman backdrop. I behaved like an "ugly American," too, insulting the Indians and accusing them of wasting American foreign aid. I was simply playing the part of an aggressive, arrogant, spoiled American,

something that was very old hat in the States, but which the Indians had never seen before. As a result, we got tremendous coverage for our remaining matches. Dara couldn't believe it, either. He had gotten lots of publicity for himself over the years, but it was next to impossible, he said, to get publicity for wrestling cards.

Actually, it had been very easy. I just reversed the needle, like I'd seen Ed Lewis do years before, by attacking the news media. It doesn't matter whether they're in broadcasting, newspapers, or magazines. Reporters are all alike in one regard: they're some of the most thin-skinned people in the world. Assaulting them is the surest way to guarantee they'll write about you, and that's what I did.

I remain grateful to this day that Dara stayed after me to work with him in India, not just because it turned out so well, but because we became very close friends, which is the greatest reward of all. By the mid-1970s, when both of us were

phasing out as active wrestlers, we had also established a strong business relationship. I was dabbling in a lot of things at the time, including booking American wrestlers for appearances overseas, and I rounded up a lot of boys for Dara. He would act as a broker, sell their services to the Indian promoters, and pay me a percentage of the fees that he collected.[51]

India also was an escape from an unhappy, 30-year marriage that finally came to an end in 1975. Jim Londos used to tell us young wrestlers that an active wrestler should never get married, and I came to believe he was absolutely right. Travel and distractions on the road killed a lot of wrestlers' marriages, like it killed mine, and it's easy to see why, what with a wrestler working on the road between 200 and 300 dates a year. It's especially hard if there are children. In our case, we had three sons — Jeff, Bob, and Pat — and I missed seeing them grow up because I was on the road so much.

Some wrestlers tried to save their marriages by taking their wives with them on the road, but that was invariably more trouble than it was worth because it caused trouble for the other boys. A wife would hear or see what the boys were up to while making the circuit — boozing, playing around with other women — and since she knew their families, she would alert their spouses to what was going on, which caused hell when the boys got back home. As for her husband, he suffered in a variety of ways, too. He could end up ostracized in the dressing rooms by angry husbands, or by his wife, who had seen for herself what was happening on the circuit, and might become very reluctant to let him loose on the road alone in the future. It was a damned-if-you-do-and-damned-if-you-don't situation.

That's the nutshell description of our divorce, and there's really only one reason why I've even mentioned it: to explain why a man who was almost 60 years old would continue to wrestle. I had to earn a living, so I went back to what I knew

best. I signed up with a Nashville-based promoter named Nick Gulas, who ran a large territory in the South.

Gulas was not a nice man, even when measured against the low standards set to measure your average wrestling promoter. He would use illiterates, carnival wrestlers, kids trying to break into the business, even illegal aliens from Mexico and Canada, because they couldn't work anywhere else and he could control them. On nights when they should have earned $100, he would pay them $10, and he got away with it because people were afraid to squawk. He treated his office help just as badly, cursing them and pushing them around, just to prove to them he could do it.

He had no regard for the fans, either. One of his favorite practices was to book his star in two or three towns on the same night and then wait to see which town had the best advance in ticket sales. The town that did the best got the star, while the others would get last-minute substitutions. I

don't know how he managed to stay in business with tactics like that, but he did it for years.

Gulas didn't care for me personally — we'd known each other since we both were kids, when I'd been on the road less than a year and he was the office gopher in the Birmingham, Alabama, promotion — but he was happy to have me because he needed a policeman. He had a couple of guys who could wrestle a little, and they'd occasionally try to push their weight around. If they got too bothersome, Gulas would simply book them with me and they'd do as they were told for awhile.

As you might expect, most of the boys really hated Gulas, and I was always worried about what might happen if someone finally lost his temper. He used to travel to some of his out-of-town matches by private plane and would try to get me to fly with him, but I always refused because I was genuinely concerned that someone might put a bomb on the plane. Once, in Nashville, the local

promoter and three of Gulas' wrestlers got liquored up during a bitter argument with him over payoffs. They decided to throw him out of a window — this was a tall office tower in the downtown area — and they actually had him by the ankles and were about to let go when I managed to talk some sense into them. Saving Gulas' ass didn't earn you a thing with him, however, because he would turn around and try to screw you the next day, and he finally tried it with me.

Chattanooga was one of his best towns. I was booked there one day when I stopped by the office in Nashville to pick up the previous week's pay. I had an agreement with Gulas that paid me a percentage of the gate, with an absolute minimum of $100, but inside my envelope that day was a $50 payoff for one of the small towns. When I got to Chattanooga, I looked up Gulas and complained. He said his booker, a worker named Tom Renesto, had handled the payoffs, so I should take up my beef with him. When I talked to Renesto, he said he knew nothing about it. I told

him what Gulas had said, and Renesto replied — in delicate language, because he wanted to keep his job — that Gulas was lying.

The following morning, back in Nashville, I dropped by the office to pick up my pay for the previous night, but Gulas said it wasn't ready yet. I had something in mind in case he stiffed me again, so I told him I'd wait. About an hour later, Gulas came out and put $100 in my hand, far short of what it should have been. We'd had a good house in Chattanooga, but Gulas claimed it wasn't as good as it looked, that expenses had been high, so on and so forth. What he didn't know was that the guy who ran the auditorium was an old friend of mine, and he had told me as I was leaving that night what Gulas had actually drawn. I knew I had $300 coming to me.

Gulas was involved at that time in a promotion war with a group based in Memphis — Buddy Fuller, Jerry Jarrett and Lester Welch — that was running opposition in some of Gulas' small

towns. They had contacted me earlier about jumping to their promotion, and I'd actually had a couple of meetings with them, just to see what they were willing to offer. I hadn't thought about it seriously, though, until Gulas came up with those two shabby payoffs. I really wanted to hit Gulas in the nose, but I knew the best way to get back at him was to hit him in the wallet. So I played it cool for a couple of weeks, figuring I'd hear from the Memphis group again.

Sure enough, they called. We had a meeting in which they offered me $5,000 in cash if I'd leave Gulas and work for them, bringing along the Southern heavyweight championship belt, which I was wearing at the time. I wasn't interested in wrestling for them because they were nothing special, but we made the deal because I wanted to sting Gulas. Once their check cleared my bank, I called them and said I was ready.

My first booking with the Memphis group was in Chattanooga with a good English wrestler, Tony

Charles, in a match that the group advertised for the Southern heavyweight championship. Gulas, who didn't know that I had changed affiliations, heard about the publicity through his contact in Chattanooga and called me immediately, wanting to know what was going on.

I told him to relax, that it was obviously a ploy by the opposition. In fact, I was booked to appear for Gulas the same night, also in Chattanooga, so it seemed plausible that the opposition group would play such a dirty trick to confuse the fans. I enjoyed having the privilege of playing the dirty trick, because I had literally paid for the privilege.

That night, I wrestled for the Memphis group, leaving Gulas to deal with a no-show. I drove back to Nashville after the matches, arriving at about two a.m., and learned Gulas had been calling me frantically, trying to find out what happened. I decided to let him stew for awhile.

Finally, at about four in the morning., I picked up

the phone and called Gulas. He answered on the first ring. "What the hell is going on here?" he screamed at me.

"You remember that $50 payoff?" I said. "You remember that $100 payoff from Chattanooga? Well, Nick, this is the real payoff." And I hung up the phone.

About 15 minutes later, my phone rang. It was Gulas and Tom Renesto, a conference call. They'd figured out by then I'd jumped to the opposition, and they were trying to woo me back. I listened for awhile, but I wasn't about to change my mind. Finally, seeing I wasn't going to budge, Gulas said he'd at least like to have his Southern heavyweight belt returned. "That's fine with me," I said. "Come and get it whenever you like."

"Great," he said. "We'll be right over."

"Wait a minute, Nick," I said. "You don't seem to understand. I mean that you'll have to come and

take it away from me in the ring. Find yourself someone who can wrestle, and I'll wrestle him for your belt."

There was a long silence, and then Renesto finally spoke up. "You know we can't do that, Lou. We don't have anyone who's a match for you."

"Yeah, I know that," I replied, "and that's why I said it."

Once I got going with the Memphis group, I lost Gulas' belt to a wrestler named Bob Roop, a former Olympian and a damned good pro. We packed the arenas everywhere, especially in Chattanooga, and I'd call Gulas after every match. "Look, Nick, I'm going to get this guy, and then I'll be back in your camp," I'd tell him. It drove him absolutely crazy, which was the point. The Memphis group was killing him all over the territory — Tennessee, Kentucky and Georgia — with his own belt.

Late that year, around Christmas, a former wrestler named Saul Weingeroff called me and tried to persuade me to return the belt to Gulas. I'd won it back from Roop by then. "Lou, we're good friends, so how about doing me a favor and letting Nick have his belt back? It would really make his Christmas," Weingeroff said.

I figured Weingeroff was only kissing Gulas' ass and trying to get something for himself, so I played him along. "Saul, I'll do it for you," I said. "Tell Nick he can have his belt back. It's only a cheap imitation of a real championship belt anyway, so I'll give it up."

Well, Weingeroff was elated — but only for a moment, because I interrupted him and told him that the price was $1,000. "I had the price at $5,000, but you're right, Saul," I said. "Since it's almost Christmas, I'll cut it to a thousand."

Weingeroff almost fainted. Gulas would shoot him, he said, if he told him what I'd just

said. "Saul, you just came up with one good reason for doing it," I said. "So please tell him."

I enjoyed all this because Gulas was the guy who enjoyed using and abusing the boys, and it was a way of paying him back. He was one of those promoters who perpetuated the image of "rassling" that sent our business down that road to where it is today, and I felt nothing for him. He's gone now, so maybe this serves no purpose in the telling. However, I learned long ago that someone who was a sonofabitch in life was still a sonofabitch when he was dead, so there you are.

I have to add, however, that my association with Nick Gulas paid an enormous dividend for me. I'd fled to Nashville from a disintegrated marriage, sour on the institution, and vowing I'd never marry again. That's where I met Charlie, the one true love of my life.

Charlie likes to tell people that she picked me up in a motel. It's pretty close to the truth. She was a

part-time clerk in a downtown Nashville motel, about a block away from the YMCA where I worked out regularly. One of my occasional handball opponents at the Y was the manager of the motel, and he persuaded me to try his place sometime, if only for the convenience. So one day I checked in, and there was an attractive and charming young woman behind the counter.

She'd had a previous marriage that had failed after five-and-a-half years, so she was no more enthusiastic or optimistic than I was about permanent relationships. We'd have coffee together at the motel's restaurant whenever I was in town and we gradually became good friends. One night, I checked in from a long road trip and was disappointed to find she wasn't working, so I got her home number and called her. I invited her to my room for wine, but she declined. So I talked her into inviting me to her place, and I guess you could say I never left.

We agreed to just enjoy each other, and

eventually we began learning about each other and actually working at our relationship. There was a 30-year difference in our ages, but we proved it wasn't a barrier. When we finally decided to get married, it was simply because there was no other choice. We couldn't imagine life without each other.

Once, several years after Charlie and I were married, I rode with a friend in his car to a booking not too far from Nashville. He had never been around the wrestling business before, so he was stunned when we arrived at the arena and saw a mob of women around the dressing room door. "We call them 'arena rats,'" I explained, "and they're available. They'll be there after the matches, too," I added, "and all a wrestler has to do is pick one he likes and take her home."

He had never seen anything like it, and later that night, as we were headed home, he kept talking about the temptations of a profession where women were so readily available. He dropped me

off at my car and I opened the door to find a note from Charlie taped to the steering wheel. She had spotted my car on her way home and had stopped to leave a message. It said, "I love you, see you at the house." I showed it to my friend.

"You asked me how someone could avoid the temptation of all those arena rats?" I said. "There's your answer."

Endnotes, Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Pro wrestling differs from other athletic entertainments in a significant way besides the obvious one. Unlike, say, football or baseball, the outcome — the final score — is really not all that important. What the fans tend to remember are the performances and how the matches — the story, if you will — unfolded.

It's the same thing with the performers. A craftsman, whatever his trade, doesn't remember the jobs that came off smoothly, without a hitch, because there's no peg on which to hang the memory. You go to work, you do the assigned task, and then you go home. One day looks pretty much like another, unless something unusual or unexpected happens. And that explains why, after wrestling more than 6,000 matches during my career, the only ones I can remember with any clarity are the ones where something especially important was at stake or where something went wrong.

I'd never really thought about it very much until I had retired and begun making occasional speeches to civic clubs and talking with fans and sportswriters who'd want me to reminisce about my career. Once in awhile someone would ask me about a specific match or situation, one they read about, or maybe even witnessed, and I could see the disappointment or confusion in their faces when I explained that I didn't remember it. They

probably figured I was senile or just being difficult. Finally, after this had happened a number of times, I decided that I'd better come up with an explanation, and this is what I started telling people: The guy who catches the winning pass in the Super Bowl, or hits the game-winning home run in the final game of the World Series, has a single, specific memory etched in his mind. If he had done the same thing over and over, though, under similar circumstances, the memory wouldn't stick.

What I tried to do in my wrestling career, every time I went into the ring, was impress the fans and send them home with a specific memory. It was like playing the Super Bowl or World Series five nights a week, 52 weeks a year, so it's only natural that the vast majority of those matches are like a blur in my mind. Ask any veteran pro wrestler and you'll find the same thing: The memories that stick are the ones about the colorful performers, crazy situations, and matches that didn't exactly go as expected.

Like the benefit wrestling card held at the Boston Garden in 1952 when I was wearing the NWA world heavyweight championship belt. It was a very big deal, arranged by Cardinal Cushing to raise funds for Italian flood relief, and the main event was a match between me and Primo Carnera, the former world heavyweight boxing champion, with Jack Dempsey as the special referee. The card was an enormous success, too, but it was literally just another night's work for me. I can guarantee you that I probably wouldn't recall much about it if Carnera hadn't been such a jerk.

I was never happy working gratis for anyone, but this event seemed like a good cause, so I agreed to appear for free, primarily because it was my good friend Eddie Quinn who asked me to do it. Ed Lewis and I cleared our schedules and flew to Boston, where we committed ourselves to a week of intensive hype for the card — interviews with the local newspapers, TV and radio appearances, luncheon speeches at the half-dozen or so Italian social clubs in the area. Our team — myself, Ed

Lewis, Jack Dempsey, Eddie Quinn, and a representative of Boston promoter, Paul Bowser, who had booked Carnera for the event — would meet early every morning in Eddie Quinn's hotel suite to discuss the day's schedule, and then we'd hit the streets, beating the promotional drums.

The bad feelings began to build on the very first day when Carnera didn't show up for our planning session. I asked Bowser's gopher where he was and was informed that Carnera had arrived late the night before and was sleeping in … which we soon discovered was a lie. Carnera had indeed arrived the night before, but he had brought some bimbo with him and was spending his time with her in the sack. We worked our asses off that week, promoting the Italian flood-relief benefit, but Carnera, the only Italian in the bunch, never left his hotel room. On the day of the match, Paul Bowser showed up at the morning meeting to discuss our match and learned that Carnera hadn't lifted a finger to promote the show. We were one unhappy group, and Bowser got an earful. I finally told

Bowser that I planned to beat Carnera that night in about five minutes, just to save his town — Carnera was an embarrassing performer — and my reputation. Bowser shrugged and said that was fine with him.

I arrived in the dressing room area at the Garden that night to find Bowser was stumbling drunk. He was one of those people who used booze as a crutch when things got tough, and the pressure was obviously on him that night. He had borrowed Carnera for the night from Toots Mondt's New York booking office, and Toots' people had called Bowser earlier that day and told him that Carnera and I had to wrestle a 45-minute match, just to protect Carnera's image. Carnera and his manager were in the dressing room that night, too, demanding that I cooperate, and the discussion got rather heated. Carnera and I were about to come to blows when my old friend Rudy Dusek walked in.

Rudy, who had been a partner in the New York office for years, had been one of my heroes when I

was a kid and he was wrestling with his brothers, the "Dirty Duseks." We'd always gotten along well, despite his association with Toots Mondt. He could see that Carnera and I were about to have an unscheduled contest right there in the dressing room, so he hustled everyone out of the room. He came back alone a few minutes later and asked me what had been going on, so I explained — that Bowser was trying to change what we'd agreed upon that morning. I was really hot, and Rudy stuck around for the rest of the evening, trying to calm me down and persuade me to reconsider. Finally, when it was time for Carnera and me to go on, I had cooled off. By the time I headed out the door for the ring, I had agreed to carry Carnera to a 45-minute match.

(The Garden had a concession stand where the fans could buy beer, and even booze, that I had to pass on my way to the ring. An old friend of mine, Jack Sharkey, a great fighter who had dumped the world heavyweight title to Carnera in 1933, was sitting there that night, and he yelled at me as I

passed by. "Hey, Lulu." — a nickname he had hung on me in Quebec, where Sharkey and I used to fish together — "You watcha you step," he said. I hollered back, "Don't worry, Jack. I won't let him step on my foot." Sharkey was so surprised, he almost fell off of his stool. Until that moment, he hadn't been aware that I knew about the finish in his title switch with Carnera. Carnera had knocked out Sharkey by first stepping on his foot with his size fourteens. When Sharkey looked down and tried to free his foot, Carnera popped him. Sharkey had gotten a nice payoff for doing it, but whoever came up with that ending must have had a lot of contempt for the fans.)[52]

The Garden was sold out for our match and the place was really jumping when I hit the ring. Dempsey called Carnera and me out for our pre-match instructions, we shook hands, and then we went to our corners. The bell rang and the comedy began. Carnera was still upset with me over our dressing room argument, so he locked up like he intended to crush me (a huge guy, he had

been a circus strongman in his early days before becoming a boxer). I cross-faced him, just a reflex move, and accidentally cut his lip. He stepped back, put his hand to his mouth, saw the blood, and exploded.

He charged me like a bull, but I grabbed him and wheeled him into a corner, where I tied up his arms. Dempsey stepped in and ordered us to break, so I dropped my hands and stepped back. Carnera did the same, and that's when I whacked him. Carnera might have been mad at me, but he had no idea how angry I was with him, for not helping us promote this benefit for his homeland. Despite what I'd told Rudy Dusek, I decided to end this farce before Carnera got lucky.

Carnera was really hot by now and he shuffled out of his corner in a fighter's stance. A boxer is absolutely no match for a wrestler in a mixed contest, so I wasn't worried. Besides, Carnera was slower than molasses in winter. I'll never understand how they ever sold the big goof to the

public as the world champion. I got inside his reach and slapped him again, then backed away. I looked at Dempsey and said, "Hey, not only can this bum not wrestle, he can't fight either." Dempsey nodded and said calmly, "Yeah, I've known that for a long time."[53]

Carnera was trying to jab me, but I stayed out of range, looking for an opening. I wanted to feed him my head, the old sucker move, so I could put the Greco-Roman backdrop on him, and he eventually gave me the chance. I stepped in when he had one of his hands raised and put my head under his arm. He grabbed it immediately in a side headlock, and the rest was easy. I wrapped my arms around his waist and picked him up, at least as high as my chin, and fell backwards, kicking out my feet just to make sure he got our combined weights on his thick head. As usually happened with an amateur or unskilled wrestler, he didn't know how to take the move, and the fall knocked him cold. It was simply a matter of rolling over and pinning him. Carnera had lasted less than five

minutes.

As I topped him, my eyes inadvertently landed on Rudy Dusek at ringside. He had his chin on the mat and one hand on his forehead, as if to say, "Oh, shit!" I couldn't help laughing, even when Dempsey finished his count, tapped me on the shoulder, nodded at Carnera and said, almost matter-of-factly, "I think you killed him." Carnera lay there for several minutes before he began to come around.

Afterwards, Rudy Dusek came back to the dressing room with an agonized look on his face. "Do you know what you've done, Thesz? I've got this bum booked in main events around the circuit next week and you've just ruined him! What the hell am I going to do for a replacement?" I suggested that Rudy dust off his tights and substitute himself, because he was a better performer, even at his advanced age, than Carnera ever would be. Rudy tried to keep a straight face, but he finally started laughing — because he knew

it was the truth. The fans who bought Primo Carnera's act as both a boxer and a wrestler were robbed of their money.

Carnera was a strange guy, but he was far from being the strangest character I ever met in pro wrestling. There was a lot of competition for that title, in fact, especially when you consider I was active in pro wrestling for so long. If I was forced to pick a candidate, though, I'd probably say Chief Chewacki, a bogus Indian who was a popular card for several years during the 1930s.

His real name was George Mitchell, but it was a long time before anyone knew it. He decided to play the role of Indian to the hilt, and that's what he did, with everybody. I was still a kid when I first saw him on one of Tom Packs' cards in St. Louis. Later, after I became a pro, I heard the story, about how Packs had hired him sight unseen, knowing only that Chewacki had been a good card in other territories. Chewacki arrived in St. Louis a couple of days before his first booking and

promptly pitched a teepee on the City Hall lawn. The cops arrived to roust him, but Chewacki had to have his fun first. "White man cheat Indian," he said to the cops in a B-movie Indian accent. "This land Indian land. Me stay here." Well, the cops finally ran him off, but not before the newspapers had showed up, so Chewacki got a bundle of free publicity, which helped tremendously at the gate. Packs actually had several sell-outs with the guy.

Chewacki convinced a lot of people that he was a real Indian, sometimes with amusing results. One night in Atlanta during the late 1930s, for instance, I wrestled on a card at a small place called Warren's Arena where Chewacki also was booked. Security was provided by some off-duty cops, and several of them were wandering in and out of the dressing rooms all evening. Chewacki struck up a conversation with one of them and ended up asking to see the guy's gun. "White man's bow and arrow," he said. Well, the cop smiled and handed it over.

Chewacki was actually very well-oriented with guns, but he was playing his role that night, so he handled it clumsily, looking at it with curiosity and pointing it around the room. He finally took aim at one of the commodes, and before the cop could stop him, he had cocked the pistol and fired it. The commode exploded, sending up a huge geyser of water. Chewacki stared at the guy as if in amazement, and then looked at the commode. "Unhh," he grunted. "Me hit spring." The cop bought the entire act and didn't do a thing, because he figured he was dealing with an ignorant savage.

I was wise to Chewacki's charade by then, thanks to my father. I had established the training camp for myself at my parents' country place outside of St. Louis, and occasionally, on weekends, I'd have the wrestlers out for a fish fry. Chewacki had attended one of them and spent a big part of the day visiting with my father, who was one of his fans. That night, after everyone had left, my father sat me down for a serious

talk. "Don't trust that guy," he said, referring to Chewacki. "He's no more an Indian than I am. He's actually a Serbian gypsy, and he'll steal you blind if he gets the chance." Pop had seen a lot of gypsies in Europe when he was a boy, and he had recognized Chewacki's accent.

Sure enough, that's exactly what Chewacki was — a Serbian gypsy and a thief. Maybe that sounds unkind, but Chewacki was only too happy to admit it when I finally asked. In fact, he was actually pleased to finally tell someone about himself and his people's life — about the various scams they worked, about how they'd train monkeys to burglarize houses — and he even invited me down to his tribe's camp, which happened to be pitched near my parents' country place. I'm not clear on how he and his tribe came to the United States, but once he got here, he had stumbled into wrestling as a perfect way to augment his income when their criminal activities attracted too much attention.

Chewacki's luck appeared to run out shortly

before World War II began when he and his tribe were nailed by the police in Seymour, Indiana, and I remember the stories vividly. They'd acquired a printing press and were counterfeiting money. His brother-in-law was responsible for carrying the bogus bankroll, and he would dole it out to the others, one bill at a time, and they'd pass it. The feds were on their trail, however, and Chewacki just happened to be the first one they caught. He decided to save his own neck, so he squealed on the others, turning in his own brother-in-law and several other members of the tribe.

By the time the war broke out, Chewacki had disappeared from the scene, and we figured he was probably on the run from his relatives. He eventually resurfaced, though, in the U.S. Navy, of all places, with the rank of commander. That was something of a shock to those of us in pro wrestling who knew Chewacki for what he actually was, but Ed Lewis eventually learned how it had happened. Ed was a close friend of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover — both were devout Christian

Scientists, which is how they came to be acquainted — and during one of Ed's visits back East, Hoover revealed to him over dinner that he had recruited Chewacki as an undercover informant to keep an eye out for possible criminal activity. Hoover had set a thief to catch a thief, and he had even used his political clout to get Chewacki his commission. Knowing Chewacki, I have to wonder how good a deal the government got.[54]

Another memorable character, one I had warm feelings for, was Andre the Giant, who was still active as a performer until his death in early 1993. His real name was Andre Roussimoff, and his parents — his mother was French, his father Bulgarian — were normal-sized people, but Andre was afflicted with acromegaly, a pituitary disorder that causes abnormal growth. What was really incredible about Andre, though, aside from the fact that he was one of the nicest, most magnanimous people in the industry, was his capacity for booze. I'd seen some people during my wrestling

days who could really put it away, but Andre was far and away the world champ. It was actually his life's work, I guess, because he devoted himself to it almost full-time. At one time, he owned a very fine restaurant in Montreal, and a lot of us figured he bought it so he could do his drinking at wholesale prices.

One night, during a tour of Japan, Andre arrived at the matches after spending the day in his hotel room, working on a case of wine — six one-liter bottles. With my own eyes, I saw Andre single-handedly kill another case in the dressing room. He finished half of them before he went out to wrestle. After he had done his usual five-minute routine in the ring, he came back and finished the rest of the case. He wasn't through, either. After the card was over, he headed back to the hotel and sat in the bar, drinking, until closing time. The next morning, I sat with him in the hotel's restaurant and watched as he consumed five or six large steins of beer with his breakfast.

His capacity was absolutely awesome. Of course, he had the size to handle it — he was 6-foot-11 (five inches shorter than his publicized height) and weighed upwards of 400 pounds — but he never failed to amaze me as I watched him put it away. I'm sure he probably suffered some serious liver damage as a result, which only made his other physical problems that much worse. In the last several years of his life, he suffered from circulatory trouble in his legs and severe back problems, probably because of his massive weight, and he had difficulty walking a flight of stairs.

If Andre had taken care of himself and actually worked out a little in the gym, he could have been an awesome physical specimen. I would have liked to have seen him do it, too, not only for his own sake, because I liked the man very much, but because I would have enjoyed seeing him tangle with Johnny Valentine, who was probably the toughest and most courageous performer I ever saw. Now that would have been a match!

A Polish kid from Hobart, Washington, a lumber-milling town outside of Seattle, Johnny was training for a career as a pro fighter when he was discovered by the local wrestling promoter. Johnny switched professions and became a top star in pro wrestling during the late 1940s and remained one until 1975, when he was seriously injured in a light plane crash that left him partially paralyzed. He had almost no wrestling ability, but he didn't need any, because he rose to the top on toughness and pure guts. Once you got past the hookers and the serious shooters, he was probably the one man in pro wrestling that you least wanted to mess with. The fans could sense his toughness, too, and they always turned out in droves to see him. They would have been floored if they had known that Johnny was actually a very easy-going guy, a serious chess player, and a lover of opera and fine wines.

Once Johnny was on top in a territory, it was only natural to match us, and we wrestled together many times over the years. In the process, we

became very good friends. However, I would never permit him to maneuver me into a compromising position in the ring, not because I was worried that he'd beat me, but because he was so tough to handle. He was like Gene Kiniski, in that he enjoyed trying to hook me and put me in jeopardy, just to see if he could get away with it, and he was so strong and well-conditioned that he could have caused me considerable embarrassment if I hadn't taken him seriously.

It was a lot of fun working with him, though, just as long as I didn't get careless. When he got a hold he liked, he would laugh and say something like, "How do you like this one, Thesz?," or, "Try this one on for size, champ," and he would crank it tighter. Sometimes he would even have the hold about half-right and it wouldn't be easy for me to escape. I knew how to play the game a little bit better than he did, though, because I'd had the expert coaching, but occasionally, I'd have to use a hook on him just to get away. If he'd had the kind of focused wrestling background that I had, things

could have been a lot different.

Johnny was so incredibly tough that he could count on his physical skills to get him through some very tight spots. Once, in Texas, the wrestling office talked him into riding a Brahma bull in the Houston Fat Stock show, the biggest annual rodeo in that part of the country, as a publicity stunt — "the toughest man in wrestling versus the toughest animal on the range." Well, Johnny was no rider, and the bull tossed him in the first couple of jumps. As he got to his feet, the animal suddenly turned and charged him. Johnny was fairly close to the fence, but the bull closed on him so quickly that everyone in the arena, including me, figured Johnny was about to become an unfortunate statistic.

Johnny knew he'd never make the fence in time, so he did the only thing he could — he took the offensive. He cocked his right fist and hit the bull in the face as hard as could, and you could hear the "Splat!" all over the arena. The bull was so surprised that he stopped dead in his tracks and

actually shook his head, which gave Johnny enough time to run for the fence. He looked like a pole vaulter, he got so much height going over.

A lot of performers hesitated to wrestle Johnny because he had what we called a very heavy hand and could hurt you without trying. One boy who learned about it the hard way was Joe Pazandak, an accomplished wrestler. He got into a conflict with the booking office in southern California over his payoffs, so he decided to make some trouble. He went to the newspaper and the state athletic commission to bitch about how he was being used, and the commission decided to settle the matter by ordering a shooting match between Pazandak and the California champion — who just happened to be Johnny Valentine.

Johnny wasn't fool enough to actually believe he could outwrestle Pazandak, but his nature was such that it didn't take a lot of coaxing or arm-twisting to persuade him to take the match. When the bell rang that right, Joe came out of his corner ready to

wrestle, but Johnny stayed right where he was. He wasn't touching the ropes, which technically meant he was inside the ring, so the referee couldn't order him to come out. Finally, after several minutes with nothing happening, Pazandak decided to edge in close enough to grab Johnny and drag him into the middle of the ring. When he got within range, though, Johnny — who hadn't forgotten his boxing training — hit him with a right hand, badly cutting his eye. Pazandak shook it off and tried again, only to get hit over the other eye, which also was cut. Johnny could see that his second punch had staggered Pazandak, so he came out of his corner and went to work, punching Pazandak with both hands. He literally beat the hell out of him, and the referee stopped the slaughter within a couple of minutes because Pazandak was bleeding so badly. Of course, the referee was the promotion's employee and could have been accused of protecting Johnny, but he had made the right decision in this case — Pazandak was absolutely helpless.

A couple of weeks later, I ran into Johnny in Dallas and asked him about the match. He said he had been worried that Pazandak would hook him and hurt him, so the adrenalin was really pumping by the time they got into the ring. The funny thing about the outcome, he said with a laugh, is that he was now bigger than before with the fans. Pazandak had tried to create a situation for himself and ended up helping Johnny.[55]

In another sense, it was too bad, because I liked Joe Pazandak, and his contest with Johnny Valentine pretty much ruined his reputation and ended his career. He should have known better, though, than to get involved in what was essentially a no-holds-barred contest. A lot of things can happen in situations like that — a guy could lose an eye, teeth or hair, or get kicked below the belt — and even an expert wrestler would be well-advised to stay away from an accomplished street-fighter.

A good friend of mine, Tim Woods, who was a

great amateur at the University of Michigan under his real name, Tim Wooden, lost a finger under those circumstances. He was wrestling all comers for a promotion in the South, doing the old carnival gimmick where the promotion would pay money to anyone who could stay with their boy until the time limit. His opponent that particular night was a biker who had a reputation as a tough bar-room brawler. Tim hooked him and had him nailed to the cross, but the guy managed to get one of Tim's fingers in his mouth … and he bit it off at the first joint.

I had enough to worry about in the gyms and at the arenas without getting involved in situations like that. It seemed like there was always someone around who was out to make a rep for himself at my expense, and it didn't matter whether I could actually handle the guy, either, because the guy's fans and supporters would continue to believe what they wanted to believe. One guy who fit that description and comes to mind immediately is Ralph (Ruffy) Silverstein, a college star in the late

1930s that a lot of older fans remember as a very tough wrestler.

Silverstein was considered by many people to be a world-beater, and he believed it himself, but I saw him show his ass more than once. Ray Steele absolutely embarrassed him once in Chicago, Ruffy's own backyard, because Ray was upset about some things Ruffy's manager had said about him. In their match, Ray would ace Ruffy out and take him to the mat. He would then get to his feet, help Ruffy up, and then proceed to take him down again. It finally got to the point that even Ruffy's fans were cheering for Ray to beat him.

Another time, while working out with Joe Scarpello, a gutsy amateur from Omaha, Silverstein actually walked off the mat. Scarpello had already put him in compromising situations two or three times during their workout, and Silverstein decided he'd had enough. His excuse for quitting was that he had eaten a late lunch and wasn't fit for a workout. Scarpello, who didn't

care for Silverstein, told him, "Don't eat late tomorrow. Come back and we'll do it again." No one was surprised when Silverstein failed to show up.

I'm sure my problems with Silverstein evolved from the fact that we were close to the same age and got into pro wrestling at about the same time. He always had a pretty high opinion of himself and his amateur credentials, but he was never a top card, even in Chicago, so it was only natural that he came to resent my success. At least that's what I was told in my early years when I'd ask people why Silverstein was so intent on giving me trouble.

I can recall a match in Dayton, Ohio, that was typical of how he behaved around me. I had a real bad knee at the time and had tried to cancel a week's worth of bookings, but promoter Al Haft persuaded me to appear, saying he already had me advertised around his circuit and the territory would be hurt if he had to substitute for me. It was

almost identical to the arguments Houston promoter Morris Sigel used when he tried to steal the title, right down to Haft promising that I'd only have to wrestle short matches. Amazingly, Haft actually kept his word.

On the night Silverstein and I were supposed to wrestle, I sought him out before our match and told him about my knee, which I couldn't even bend at that point. "Don't even touch it tonight," I told him. "It's really causing me problems." Sure enough, when we got out there, Silverstein came out of his corner and, with his first move, did a single-leg takedown on my bad leg. If I hadn't been able to scramble to the ropes, it's entirely possible that he would have nailed me. I was slated to win that night, which he didn't like, of course, so he decided to make it as rough on me as possible while we were in there.

Naturally, I made him pay for that night many times over the years, mainly by refusing to go along with anything that would make him look

good. One time, we wrestled a 90-minute draw in Houston, in the dead of summer and in a building that wasn't air-conditioned. God, it must have been 120 degrees under those ring lights! After 30 minutes, Silverstein tried to quit, but I wouldn't let him, even when he started pleading with the referee to stop it. "He's only kidding, ref. Don't pay any attention to him," I said. Silverstein was never well-conditioned aerobically, only a quarter-miler, so I punished him by forcing him to wrestle a pace that literally had him hanging on the ropes at the end, limp as a dishrag. He was so exhausted, he actually had to be carried back to the dressing room.

Silverstein wasn't the only jerk in pro wrestling, not by a long shot. A famous one who comes to mind was Dick Afflis, a former football player who became a big star in the Midwest during the 1950s under the ring name of Dick the Bruiser. Dick's ring personality was that of a big-mouthed barroom brawler, and as it turned out, it wasn't far from reality. He actually liked to

brawl, and his name appeared on a few police blotters around the country as a result. He wasn't as tough as he liked to think he was, though, especially when it came to tangling with real wrestlers. He once got into a dressing room argument with Verne Gagne that ended with the Bruiser learning a lesson.

Dick eventually got his hands on the Indianapolis promotion, which had once been a great wrestling territory, but he quickly ran it into the ground, because he insisted on promoting himself as the top star, long past the point where he was a credible performer. He had an enormous ego and couldn't be talked into stepping aside, even when it would have saved his business. I once wrestled a television match there with Dr. Bill Miller, the great Ohio State star who was a tremendous villain wrestler, that even had the boys in the dressing room applauding. The match never appeared on TV, though, because Bruiser had it erased as soon as he saw it. He couldn't stand the idea of anyone looking better than he did. The same thing

happened with a TV interview Miller had taped to promote an upcoming main event against Bruiser. Miller was boasting about himself and merely said he couldn't understand how the Indianapolis fans could cheer for a "five-foot, eight-inch runt like Dick the Bruiser" when they had a real man like himself on the scene. It was a great interview, but Dick erased it because he didn't like having his actual size advertised to the fans.

I'll say this about Dick the Bruiser, though, and every other one of the characters in pro wrestling: Without them, I wouldn't have the big supply of colorful stories with which to entertain the crowds at luncheons, banquets, and fan club conventions where I'm still invited to speak. I'd much rather talk about them and the old days than discuss what's happening now.

Endnotes, Chapter 17

Chapter 18

It says a lot to me about the American news media that, when they rediscovered pro wrestling in the early 1980s and began reporting about its "amazing revival," they described it as a quaint and all-but-extinct relic of the 1950s and the early days of television. It was lazy reporting. If they had bothered to do a little easy homework instead of relying on their own biases, they would have discovered they had been conned — that pro wrestling was thriving throughout the country during the 1960s and 1970s, in many cases even surpassing the big gates we'd drawn in the so-called "Golden Age."

Ironically, when the newspaper, magazine, and TV stories about the boom began appearing in early 1984, the peak had already passed. Promotions in places like Texas, the Carolinas, Florida, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Louisiana had enormous box-office business in 1983 and were actually beginning to see their

business fall off a bit. What happened in 1984, simply stated, is that the New York-based news media was conned by the New York-based World Wrestling Federation into believing the boom was only beginning, and that it was centered in the Northeast. Once the story popped in New York, the other media markets simply — and lazily — followed suit.

To be honest, you can't really blame the news media all that much because people inside the wrestling industry still protected it fiercely from outside scrutiny. If the media had been allowed inside for a closer look, though, they would have found an even better story than the bogus one about pro wrestling's "revival" — a take-no-prisoners, scorched-earth promotional war that changed the face of pro wrestling. Within less than five years, the old system of regional promotions was dead, replaced by a single "superpromotion."

The figurehead architect of the war was then-38-year-old Vincent Kennedy McMahon — known

informally inside the industry as Vince Jr. or Vinnie — who inherited the World Wrestling Federation when his father, Vincent James McMahon, was diagnosed with cancer in 1983. Vinnie's organization assumed control of the most lucrative promotion in the country, but they were ambitious. They wanted to become the dominant wrestling promotion in the country, and they were well situated in New York — where all of the major television networks and print media are headquartered — to accomplish it. First of all, though, he needed to build around a hot attraction, and he found one, already made-to-order, in Verne Gagne's AWA promotion in Minneapolis.

Vince Jr. would have people think otherwise, but Hulk Hogan was not his creation. Neither was the "Hulkamania" craze McMahon was to merchandise so successfully during the late 1980s and into the 1990s. All his organization did was come with the name for what had exploded in Japan in 1981 and spread to Gagne's AWA. By the time the WWF set its sights on acquiring him, Hogan was already

one of the hottest box-office names in the business.

In my mind, Hogan symbolizes better than anyone the culmination of what began with Antonino Rocca in the late 1940s: the ascendancy of character performers and the demise of credibility. Hogan was an absolutely horrible performer, notorious for his total ignorance of wrestling, but he had such great charisma and physical presence that promoters couldn't resist promoting him. He appeared in the AWA in 1981 as a villain, with only two or three years of experience, and it showed, but he became so popular with the paying customers he was soon working main events as a clean-cut hero, leading the AWA to record profits. Verne Gagne wouldn't give him the AWA's world title, though — in part because Gagne figured he was too poor a wrestler to be a credible champion — so Hogan was receptive to a better offer when Vince Sr., in one of his last business moves, approached him during a Japan tour in late 1983 and persuaded him to jump to the WWF for a lot of money and its title.

Hogan's move to the WWF was big news in the industry because it confirmed what a lot of people inside the business sensed: that the WWF was arming itself for war. It already had raided another promotion and stolen some of its stars, so there was plenty of talk about a nationwide promotion war before it actually happened. Sure enough, when the WWF put its title on Hogan in early 1984 and began beating the New York publicity drums about wrestling's "new" popularity, the other promotions' worst fears were realized. Vinnie took the WWF on the road, invading established NWA and AWA territories all over the country, buying away local promotions' TV time — including the long-running local show in St. Louis, the traditional seat of pro wrestling in the United States — and substituting his own TV shows.

In mid-1984, the WWF wooed two celebrities who were hot at the moment, pop singer Cyndi Lauper and TV action star Mr. T, into working with some of its wrestlers on a TV special that

generated enormous national publicity for the company. In short order, it also bought away a rival promoter's TV time on the USA cable network and took over another company's time slot on media mogul Ted Turner's Atlanta cable "superstation," WTBS, which gave the WWF a virtual monopoly in terms of visibility for pro wrestling. What with the news media being manipulated into believing Vinnie's hype — and that's exactly what it was, because his company was actually struggling financially — and the exposure on cable TV, it's no wonder the public came to believe the WWF was the only wrestling promotion around.

I was watching all this from the sidelines with a mounting sense of distaste, because I could see the industry so many of us had tried to perpetuate headed for the toilet. And I'd have to say now, without any pride or satisfaction in my powers of observation, my worst fears were realized. When the promotion war began in earnest in 1984, there were still something like 20 or so regional

wrestling promotions operating around the country. Four years later, there were fewer than five, and only one — Jim Crockett's NWA promotion in the Carolinas — could be considered viable. No one was making any money, not even the WWF, which survived 1987 only because it was deriving so much money from merchandising its toys and other products.

I lay a lot of the blame for what happened on the NWA. The organization had pretty much established total control over pro wrestling in the 1950s, but the leadership gave it away by cooperating with people like Toots Mondt and Vinnie's father, Vince McMahon Sr. In those days, and well into the 1970s, for that matter, the New York wrestling office was simply another promotion, albeit a very profitable one, and if the NWA had pressed its advantage — like, say, by running competition in the Northeast when it still had credibility — maybe none of this would have happened.

An alliance of promoters like the NWA could have contended with the WWF by pooling talent and cooperating with each other to meet the challenge, but, by the time the war started up, the NWA had diminished in both stature and membership. In fact, it really had ceased to exist, except as a name, thanks to promoter Jim Crockett. In the early 1980s, he had managed to put the NWA championship belt on one of his wrestlers, Ric Flair, a hard-working performer in the tradition of Buddy Rogers. Flair was so important to Crockett within his own territory that he eventually announced to the NWA members they could only have Flair on those dates when he was not working for Crockett. It was the same stunt Toots Mondt and Vince Sr. had tried in the early 1960s when they signed Buddy Rogers, only this time the NWA couldn't do anything about it. It was literally every man for himself when the war began, and one by one, they were forced to shut down.

The WWF eventually succeeded in running

Crockett out of the business, too, thanks in large part to some bad business decisions by Crockett, who decided he, too, would promote nationally. But Crockett didn't have the deep pockets Vinnie did, and he didn't have the New York connections or publicity machine, so he ended up running deeply in the red. He had the last laugh of sorts, though, because in 1988, he sold a majority interest in his company to someone with deeper pockets than Vinnie — Ted Turner, who had noticed that some of Crockett's special TV shows on WTBS had drawn record-level ratings for cable. Turner was probably more interested in simply buying product for his TV stations than he was in competing with Vince McMahon Jr. for dominance of the wrestling business, but the bottom line is that there is at least one alternative to McMahon's product.[56]

I have to give the WWF credit, though, on several points. It was smart enough to see the potential of cable TV, which is really what made a national promotion possible. By the late 1980s,

enough homes around the country had been wired for cable to make pay-per-view shows especially lucrative, and the WWF has benefited enormously from those shows. The company also was savvy enough — and blessed with enough connections to important people in the entertainment industry — to get wrestling back on network television for awhile, in 1985, as a bi-monthly replacement on NBC for Saturday Night Live, and later with some prime-time specials. I suppose I could also compliment Vinnie and his associates for hyping a non-existent wrestling "revival" so successfully that it actually occurred and became a lucrative retail business, as well.

I am proud to have been a part of the rise of pro wrestling, and it pains me to have been a witness to its demise. I can see it has not escaped the pitfalls of all other consumer products, where the money goes into telling you it is great, instead of investing in quality talent to make it a great product. However, I cannot condemn the WWF for announcing to the world that pro wrestling is an

entertainment, which it did in New Jersey in 1987 when it was trying to escape from the scrutiny of that state's athletic commission. It was a shrewd move for someone in that situation, and it succeeded. The athletic commission no longer has a hold over the WWF, and medical exams for the wrestlers are now a thing of the past, just when blood testing for drugs and steroids was becoming controversial in sports.

In an odd way, I really found it comforting to have the distinction made. I was a pro wrestler, and I had the privilege of knowing and wrestling some terrific wrestlers who came from the amateur ranks into the pros. There were many boys who knew very little about wrestling before they signed on, but they were men who had personal pride in the product they produced, so they did their homework and gave the fans a great performance. To us it wasn't just a job — it was a responsibility to ourselves and to our fans, and perhaps, even more importantly, to each other.

Pro wrestling has changed so much. For instance, I see, in the dressing rooms today, a lack of the rivalry I loved. The greatest thrill of a wrestler's career was when the dressing room emptied during his match. When all the boys wanted to see your match, you knew you had arrived at the pinnacle of your profession. The rush was present, too, when you were one of those boys watching a great match from backstage. That's not there today, and I truly feel the current boys have missed a very important boat.

The drug scandals, the sex scandals, and the crime element have not really hurt pro wrestling's image, and that says something all on its own. The boys we have lost to overdoses and violence have made me feel old when nothing else could. I witnessed the era of competitive wrestling which belonged to Ed Lewis in the '20s and '30s. I reigned over the era that saw the introduction of personality and showmanship in the '40s and '50s, and I held my own as wrestling ability became

obsolete in the ‘60s and ‘70s. The ‘80s and ‘90s find me a "senior citizen" of a foreign country.

Ironically, it is Japan which could prove to be the salvation of pro wrestling. It was there, on December 26, 1990, one day shy of 53 years after I won my first title, that I last climbed into the ring as a wrestler. I was seven months past 74 years of age and should have known better. I pulled on my long tights for the final time and climbed into the ring with a well-trained, well-conditioned, 27-year-old athlete named Masahiro Chono. A former student of mine — one of the better ones, too — he was one of Japan’s top wrestlers, and I was thrilled when I was offered the chance to wrestle him.

What happened that night proves you can’t die of humiliation, no matter how hard you try. I saw only the ring lights, not the reality, and wanted very much to feel again that rush of wrestling in front of an audience. I wasn’t thinking about Chono, who was in a no-win situation. If he won, he would be

destroying the image of "the Eternal Iron Man," a name the Japanese had called me for years. If he lost, he would look foolish and inept to his peers and fans.

Although I hadn't wrestled a match in years, I felt confident. Chono was wrestling an average of five matches a week at the time and was very fit, but I had all that experience behind me, so I figured I wouldn't have any trouble. If I didn't beat him, I figured, I could at least make us both look good.

It wasn't to be. After about 10 minutes of a so-so performance by both of us, my artificial hip settled the matter. I had Chono by his waist, upside down and ready for a reverse body slam — sometimes called an authentic piledriver — when my hip joint gave way. The pain wasn't bad, but the lack of support for my 200 pounds and Chono's 250 pounds put me down and ended the match.

I have always had great respect and affection for the Japanese, and that respect and affection was

returned to me many-fold in the wake of that match. The leading sports publication, Tokyo Sports, was the kindest of all. I'd been told it never featured pro wrestling on its front page and rarely used more than one color photo in any edition, so you can imagine my surprise when the next morning's edition featured three color photos of my match with Chono — on the front page! I was especially grateful that the photographer, in keeping with the Japanese quest for perfection, had managed to capture the three isolated seconds in which I had looked like a wrestler. No culture in the world could have been kinder in saving an old wrestler's face, and I can't express my gratitude.

Today, with my enduring love for wrestling and an artificial hip that works amazingly well under normal stress, I have semi-retired to a position of spokesperson for a new trend in pro wrestling. As I said earlier, the Japanese are leading the way.

The Union of Wrestling Forces International, better known as UWFI, is a group of fine athletes

who have depended on their talents, not aesthetics, to build a strong base of hard-core fans. The competition is fierce and is being led by an American, Gary Albright, who was an outstanding amateur champion in Greco-Roman, and a Japanese, Nobuhiko Takada. The style combines martial arts with wrestling to produce what is called "kick-wrestling." Pin falls don't count; a match ends with either a concession or when a competitor is unable to continue.

I am doubly proud of my association with UWFI because of the entree into the professional world it provides for top amateur wrestlers, such as Dennis Kowslowski, the Olympic gold and silver medalist in Greco-Roman, and Dan Severn, a six-time national champion in Sambo. These bright, competitive wrestlers have a shot at earning a living doing what they love, and I know how valuable an opportunity like that is.

UWFI has a unique marketing plan. It has no television show, and it promotes matches only

once a month on average. It relies on the open press and print media advertisements for visibility, and yet it is thriving. At this writing, Japan has approximately 18 active wrestling promotions; the two largest ones, dollar-wise, are New Japan and All Japan, each of which has been on the scene for 30 years or more. In third place, only two years into its existence, is UWFI. Its wrestlers are respected in society and set good examples for young people, and the company itself has built its success on an honest product, so maybe there's hope.

Since history is doomed to repeat itself, I feel certain the days of competitive pro wrestling will return. I thought Ted Turner would be its savior, but I was naive. That's no reflection on him, though. I met him many years ago and I was impressed. I am still impressed and have respect for him as a person and a businessman. I hope I never lose respect for what a man chooses to do with his money.

My association with UWFI has put me in touch again with my amateur soul and some outstanding amateur athletes, as well. I have long enjoyed a warm relationship with Gray Simons, the wrestling coach at Old Dominion University near my home in Norfolk, Virginia. Through a good friend and associate, Mike Chapman, I had the pleasure of meeting Dan Gable at the University of Iowa during one of his team's workouts. Gable is a legend in amateur wrestling, and his talent could never be "created" by a good publicist. It was a thrill to see not only the dedication of Dan Gable and his wrestlers to the sport, but to witness the progress that's been achieved in training and coaching techniques. It is particularly gratifying to me to note the rise in the popularity of amateur wrestling.[57]

If I can be permitted a short stand on the soap box, let me say that, of all the sports available today, wrestling is the most constructive. While injuries happen, they are rarely life threatening because the sport is a natural test of the mechanics

of the body — leverage, strength, and mental agility. Psychologically, wrestling teaches self-reliance; regardless of whether a wrestler wins or loses, he alone is responsible for the outcome, and he'll seldom lose the same way twice. I have never known a good wrestler who didn't succeed in life, simply because the first thing we learn is tenacity. Ed Lewis said it best: "It's close to impossible to beat a man who doesn't know he's beaten."

Although I have turned my focus in recent years to the amateurs, I still keep up with the past. The Cauliflower Alley Club was founded some years ago in Los Angeles by my friend, the late Mike Mazurki, as a "ring of friendship," and I have the honor of serving as its president. It brings together wrestlers, boxers, and movie industry people to enjoy each other's company, and it has been a pleasure to see its membership grow to more than 1,800 members. Aside from getting together annually for a banquet, we are working to raise funds to award college scholarships to bright,

hard-working athletes.[58]

I may be 78 years old, but I feel great, thanks to wrestling. It has given me good health, because fitness became a way of life for me. It fed, clothed, and far more than merely supported three wives, three sons, and one hard-working, fun-loving gypsy. It has given me good friends, too, because I had so many people in my life that I have a better chance than most of finding those of extraordinary quality. And wrestling has made me appreciate my home because I had the entire world from which to choose it.

When people ask me how I stay so active and look younger than my years, or some cheeky bastard asks how I keep up with a wife who is 30 years my junior, I tell them my secret is choosing my ancestors carefully. I don't think they'd believe what I see as the real truth: that I'm a wrestler.

Endnotes, Chapter 18

Chapter 1 Endnotes

[1] It was Harry Truman who occasionally attended the matches in Kansas City when he was a local judge. In 1934, he was elected to the U.S. Senate from Missouri, but he continued to attend the matches when he was home and occasionally visited the dressing rooms to chat with the wrestlers. His wife, Bess, made no secret of the fact that she, too, was a big fan. Asked once, after his presidency when they had returned to Missouri, about what she missed most about life in Washington, D.C., she replied, "Wrestling on Thursday nights." Truman also was a long-time friend of St. Louis promoter Sam Muchnick, who became one of the legendary figures of the pro wrestling industry. Their relationship dated back to the late 1930s when Muchnick was an office gopher for St. Louis wrestling promoter Tom Packs and occasionally accompanied wrestlers to appearances in Kansas City.

One story repeated over the years in the St. Louis newspapers had to do with Truman's first visit home to Missouri in 1945, shortly after he became president upon Franklin D. Roosevelt's death and World War II had ended. According to St. Louis Post-Dispatch sportswriter Bob Broeg's version, Truman's plane stopped at Scott Field near St. Louis for refueling. The base's military brass lined the landing strip, "eager to meet and to shake hands with the man whose use of the atomic bomb had ended the bloodbath." Truman stepped from the door of the presidential plane, waved his hat in a friendly salute to the crowd, and began walking down the steps. At the foot of the ramp were several non-coms standing at attention in formation, and Truman brightened when he saw a familiar face among them. "Hi, Sam," he called out, stepping over to shake hands with Muchnick, who was stationed at the public relations office at the air base. It was a deflating experience for the brass, wrote Broeg, as Truman ignored them for several moments while chatting with this lowly sergeant.

Three years later, according to letters on file at the Truman presidential library in Independence, Missouri, Muchnick earned Truman's gratitude when he agreed to relinquish a reservation he held on the Kiel Auditorium for a wrestling show to let Truman have the facility for a campaign rally.

[2] Pro wrestling's unique blend of athleticism and theater prompted Lou to write the following note to me, long after we'd finished the original manuscript. He'd tackled the subject in his original draft notes for the book, before my involvement, and this is an expanded version of what he wrote. It's included here as an informed insider's view of what was involved in pro wrestling's gate appeal. "It's not a contest, and never was, hence it's not 'fake,' as a lot of the critics like to say," Lou wrote. "This is a show, and if you're one of the fans who buy it as 'real' — some do, some don't — then I suppose you'd have a complaint. A lot of the fans would like to believe it's real because it justifies their interest. Whatever their approach, they're all hooked on the

fantasy, which has several elements. Pro wrestling involves sex, violence, colorful personalities, great bodies, melodrama, and occasional doses of humor. It's really a strange thing. A lot of women come to wrestling shows exclusively for the beefcake — guys with good bodies in shorts or less, and the obvious bulge in the crotch, and I can assure you that rock 'n' rollers weren't the first ones to pad themselves. It's been going on in wrestling for years. I remember from years ago, in Memphis, there was a famous madam who had an entire row ringside every Monday for herself and her girls. They were some of the most devoted fans we had, which was strange. Here they'd done everything imaginable with their customers, and yet they were still fascinated with the male body. Who knows, maybe some of them even liked the wrestling. As for the male fans, some of them came to see the girl wrestlers, for a variety of reasons. They liked to look at the bodies, of course, and watch them bounce their boobs, or put themselves in strange positions, the kind of stuff they can't see at home. I knew an actor in

Hollywood who was a leading man on TV, and he was absolutely fascinated with the women. I even introduced him to a couple of them, and it was like I'd done him this incredible favor. Finally, there's a Walter Mitty angle for some of the males. A lot of guys go to see themselves, if that makes sense. I talked to a lot of them over the years who were fringe athletes when they were young and liked to believe they could have been champions at whatever sport they played, 'if only I'd gotten the training,' and stuff like that. It was obvious to me that many of them didn't know the front of a jockstrap from the back; still, they loved to talk about their athletic abilities and what they could have done. Believe me when I say I've met hundreds of them."

[3] Lou is referring here to the three matches that took place between Lewis and Stecher, and if press accounts are to be believed, they lasted a combined total of nine hours. The most famous of these matches was the second one, which took place on July 4, 1916, In Omaha, in front of 18,000

fans; it reportedly lasted four hours and 52 minutes and ended in a very unpopular draw. Whether any of the matches were "legitimate" contests remains in dispute. What is clear is that Lewis, a superb defensive wrestler, refused to lock up with Stecher in the first two matches (and, in doing so, allegedly cleaned up on bets with gamblers who believed he would lose). The third match, in New York's Madison Square Garden, ended in a draw, but it was a fast-paced match filled with action, and, unlike the first two matches, the fans went home happy. It was almost certainly, according to respected wrestling historian/researcher Steve Yohe, a "worked" match.

For the record, Lewis and Stecher wrestled each other 19 times over the years. According to Yohe, Stecher won six, Lewis nine, and four were draws. Before 1928, however, when the two were still in their wrestling primes, Stecher was clearly the dominant wrestler, with five wins to three for Lewis.

Chapter 2 Endnotes

[4] Lou said his father came to the United States to avoid military conscription in his native Hungary. According to the Ellis Island Foundation's records, Martin Thesz arrived in the U.S. from Hungary on March 16, 1907, at age 18. He had, according to the ship's manifest, $12 in his pocket and a pre-paid ticket to St. Louis, where he was joining his father, Adam. (Trivia-minded readers could tell you he came aboard the Carpathia, which five years later, on April 15, 1912, was the first ship to respond to a SOS from the famous luxury liner Titanic; a total of 705 survivors were taken aboard.) Lou's mother, Katherine, had arrived with her family two years earlier, in 1905, and settled in St. Louis. Her father, Hans Schultz, had been a potter in Vienna, Austria. "He had heard about the 'gold sidewalks' in the U.S.," Thesz said, "and he wanted to be a part of it."

[5] It's not clear when Lou formally changed his name to Louis Martin Thesz, which is how it appears on his passport and Social Security records. A persistent story among wrestling historians is that his given name was Lajos Tiza, but Lou said that was simply the phonetic spelling of his name in Hungarian. His sisters, who survived him, agreed emphatically that his given name was Aloysius Martin Thesz. (All five of the Thesz children were named after saints, and his name was a source of amusement to Lou because he did not resemble his namesake in at least one significant way: According to a variety of Catholic sources, St. Aloysius Gonzaga, who died at age 23 in 1591, decided on a religious life at age nine or 10 and took a vow of "perpetual virginity." One source says in order to "safeguard himself from possible temptation, he would keep his eyes persistently downcast in the presence of women." Simply put, Lou appreciated and enjoyed the company of women.)

[6] Actually, Lou's first "pro" match appears to

have been April 5, 1934, in Collinsville, Ill., which he lost to Eddie Piantanida. His recollection about Joe Sanderson having words in the dressing room with the promoter, however, rings true, as Sanderson was there (he was the referee for Lou's match). Lou appeared again in Collinsville on April 24, his 18th birthday, and won over Ben Bailey. His earliest known appearance for the Rev. Gunn in East St. Louis was June 27, which ended in a draw. He wrestled on many of Gunn's cards through the remainder of 1934 and into 1935.

[7] George Tragos (1892-1955) came to the United States alone from his native Greece in 1907 when he was 15 years old. (The family's last name was actually Capetanopoulos, but was likely changed when they entered the U.S.) He joined his father, who had come over earlier, in Gary, Ind., and from there they moved to Chicago, where the younger Tragos got his start in amateur wrestling in an ethnic athletic club. Where he learned to hook remains a mystery. The likely place would have

been as part of a carnival troupe, but his son, William, says his father did not go that route. What is known is that by 1919, Tragos was a polished wrestler. He won the national AAU title at 158 pounds that year as part of a powerful squad sponsored by the Gary, Indiana, YMCA. By 1922, having moved to St. Louis, he was employed as a machinist at Gary-based Illinois Steel and he was wrestling professionally as a middleweight. Except for occasional brief forays into the eastern U.S., that's where he remained for the rest of his life. He is widely reputed to have worked for a time as a wrestling instructor at the University of Missouri (he was friends with the athletic director and football coach), but that claim, like the reports of his participation in at least two Olympic Games as a member of the Greek team, has yet to be substantiated. He wrestled professionally until 1941 and then became a physical education instructor for the U.S. Army at a training camp in St. Louis during World War II. After the war, he and a partner bought a restaurant across the street from the Army camp

and operated it until his death in 1955. He is buried in St. Louis.

[8] Ray Steele (1900-1949), a top-echelon star in pro wrestling from the 1920s through the early 1940s, was one of the first to see Lou's potential. "I didn't know until Ed Lewis and I were a team in the 1950s, when I was the National Wrestling Alliance [NWA] champion and Ed was my advance man, that he and Ray had persuaded George Tragos to ease up on me," Lou once said. "They were the only two wrestlers that George had much respect for. Ed told me they were concerned that George was over-training me when I was breaking in, so they went to him and suggested he back off a little — which he apparently did, although I couldn't tell. Looking back now, I can see that it was possible George could have driven me out of the business if he had made it too tough."

Steele, who was born in Russia and raised in Nebraska, wrestled as an amateur during his

teenage years and later joined a carnival troupe in the Northwest, where he formed a lasting friendship with Jim Londos. "Ray was a very kind person and he never forgot his carnival roots, because he was always drawn to those people that I'd describe as the lower end of society: the carnies, burlesque girls, gangsters, bellhops, pimps, and whores. Actually, he was very friendly with everybody, but those were the people he was most comfortable with," said Lou.

"The St. Louis wrestling office in those days was located in the top suite in the Maryland Hotel, which had a nice façade to it that made you think it was a nicer place than it actually was. Ray was making big money by then and could have afforded to live just about anywhere, but because of the clientele, the Maryland is where he made his home. He was comfortable there. The manager liked Ray, so he named him the hotel detective and gave him a pass key to every room, which was like giving a kid the key to a candy store. Ray used the key to get into the rooms adjoining those where the

whores did their business, and he would bore a hole in the wall so he could watch the action.

"One of the characters who hung out at the hotel was a guy named Doc Punch, who'd once been a fairly prominent physician in St. Louis before he fell into the booze and began playing the ponies. Doc would hang out around the garage where a lot of us parked our cars, and we were his regular touches. He could panhandle with more dignity than a federal judge, and Ray loved him. Once, Ray and a couple of the show girls got Doc drunk and stripped him of his clothes. They painted his ass red with mercurochrome, stuck him in the elevator, and sent it down to the lobby where there was some sort of society function going on. Naturally, there was a big scene and the manager threatened to have Doc arrested, but Ray intervened and kept him out of jail. That's the kind of humor Ray enjoyed. If there was no action, Ray would start it.

"On another occasion, in the 1940s, when Ray

was the National Wrestling Association's heavyweight champion, he and Sam Muchnick drove to Houston in Ray's car for a title match. When they got to their hotel, Ray had Sam drop him off at the front door, then he went straight to the phone and called the cops to report that his car had been stolen. The cops picked up Sam before he had even found a parking place and took him to jail. Ray let him sit in a cell for a couple of hours before going to the police station to explain that it was all a 'mistake.' Ray thought it was a funny gag, but the police chief didn't. He warned Ray that he would be the one behind bars if he pulled any mores stunts like that in his town."

[9] Warren Bockwinkel (1911-1986) was, along with Ray Steele, another of the wrestlers who had a hand in introducing Thesz to the pro wrestling lifestyle. "Warren, who was one of my first regular workout partners, is the guy who actually took me up to the wrestling office in St. Louis and introduced me to Tom Packs," Lou said. "He was married by then and had a son, Nick, who became

a great pro years later. In the daytime, Warren worked as a truck driver for a shoe company to make ends meet, so he had obligations that kept him from ever becoming much more than a local star in pro wrestling. Had he been able to devote himself to it full time, he could have become one of the best in the business. In my book, he was already one of the best, because he went out of his way to help me both in and out of the ring. Especially out of the ring, in fact. All of us who were serious about wrestling worked hard at our sport and kept our bodies in top condition. It was Warren, though, who convinced me in both word and deeds that everything had to be in top working condition at all times — and, if it's not clear, what I'm talking about here is the sexual opportunities that were available to us. He was incredibly handsome, a roughneck type that a lot of women found very appealing, and while he was a devoted husband and father, he could never say 'no' to a lady. If you can imagine male pin-ups, that's what we were — walking, talking advertisements for the libido. We were macho

jocks long before we even knew what the term meant, and Warren was one of the leaders of the movement. The world was our oyster, and we ordered by the gross, not by the dozen. I was nowhere in Warren's class with the ladies for years to come, but he was the guy who at least opened the door to me and showed me what was available."

In the name of presenting as complete as record as possible, Lou said his first sexual experience occurred when he was 15 and one of his classmates in John Zastrow's wrestling class invited him to a weenie roast at a farm outside St. Louis. It was there, Lou said, that he learned he had been wasting his time with "girls" and was introduced to "women." A 27-year-old school teacher who was chaperoning the event took him by the hand and gave him what was literally "a roll in the hay" in a barn on the property. It was a relationship that lasted for several years, so he was no neophyte by the time he came under the influence of people like Warren Bockwinkel and

Ray Steele, but, as Lou liked to say with that booming laugh of his, it was a while "before the quality of those experiences began to show."

Chapter 3 Endnotes

[10] For the record, Grubmeier was the most common spelling of this legend's last name in newspaper reports of his wrestling career. However, he was born Fred Grobmeier in 1896 in Harlan, Iowa. When he died in Arkansas in 1970, the spelling had changed to Grobmier, which remains the accepted spelling today.

Chapter 4 Endnotes

[11] One of the shooters who came to Des Moines with Ed Lewis was a guy named "Smiling" Steve Savage. "He was a good wrestler, but he was a

horrible performer with one of the worst gimmicks I ever saw," Lou said. "His nickname is the tipoff: He would smile when his opponent got a credible hold on him — and it was an awful thing to see. He never got over or made any money, though, and he couldn't understand it because he thought it was a good gimmick. Ed had hired him as a training partner because he was so stiff and hard to work with, which is what Ed needed at the time. I watched the workouts for two weeks, and I can say this about Savage: He wasn't smiling when he worked with Ed Lewis. It's hard to smile while eating canvas."

[12] The $16-million figure is almost certainly an exaggeration. Lou said every time Lewis heard an estimate of Jack Dempsey's fortune, he would revise his own number upward for the press. "He liked the idea of making more money than Jack," Lou once said. Whatever the actual number — and only Lewis and his accountants knew for sure — it's clear that Lewis made and lost more than one fortune. Several sources put the actual amount at

$4 million, but it's worth repeating that the number probably came from Lewis himself.

[13] Gus Sonnenberg (1898-1944) revolutionized pro wrestling when he broke into the business in the late 1920s. He was the first football star to capitalize on his football reputation, and he paved the way for a lot of footballers like Joe Savoldi and others who came into pro wrestling later.

"Gus was a very good athlete, but he never was much of a wrestler," said Lou. "He was simply capitalizing on his fame, and he was happy to admit it in private. Football had left him with a bad knee and his playing days were drawing to a close when Bowser approached him, so he was just grateful for the chance to make some money, which he had never seen much of in pro football.

"I got to know him when I was 17 or 18 and wrestled on a card with him in Minneapolis. Ed Lewis was refereeing that night and also kind of looking out for Gus, who had fallen into the bottle

while he was in Los Angeles and dating a Hollywood starlet named Judith Allen. That's how I got involved. She was in love with Hollywood, not Gus, and was doing a lot of couch interviews, hoping to catch a break. She was a typical starlet, meaning she would do anything to get her name in the papers. They were like cocaine whores, and I mean it when I say they'd do anything to get their fix. They were strange people, and I got to see some of them up close myself later in my career, in the 1950s when I was working Southern California. They were fooling themselves, always hoping for that touch of magic that would put them on the path to stardom, and I have to say my time with Gus clued me in early to what type of people they were and what to expect from them. Gus just didn't have good sense when it came to Judith Allen. She eventually married him, but in 1933, while Gus was in the hospital recovering from a reported heart attack, she filed for a divorce after word got out she was dating movie star Gary Cooper. Gus was heartbroken, and he began drinking heavily. It got so bad he

began to missing bookings, which was inexcusable, so Ed and other friends in the business were doing what they could to keep him sober, or at least get him to his dates.

"Gus had a supercharged Auburn speedster with an electronic transmission, a car that was way ahead of its time and could really fly, and he had it with them that night in Minneapolis when we first met. Of course, a hot car plus heavy drinking was a dangerous combination, so Ed arranged for me to drive Gus to his dates in his car. He also persuaded promoter Tony Stecher to book the two of us in the same towns on the same cards with Gus, so we spent a lot of time together, the three of us, and I really came to like Gus. He was a lot like Ed, in that both made and spent a lot of money on the good life. Later, when Ed had to move on, Gus arranged for me to get booked on cards with him throughout the Midwest. It was his way of expressing his appreciation, I guess. He respected the fact that I was pursuing real wrestling, while he was getting by doing his own thing, and he was

grateful that I was there for him when he was having a tough time. I had a lot of empathy for the guy, and I became a part of the club that would sort of look after him.

One night, I think it was in Oakland, California, in the late 1930s, we were booked together and his football knee went out during the match. He couldn't get to his feet, so I grabbed his ankle with both hands and began yanking the leg, like I was trying to punish him. All of a sudden, he said, 'Okay, it's fine now,' so we went ahead and worked a couple of minutes before he beat me. I was an impressionable kid in those early days, and being around Gus was part of my education. He persuaded me, by his example, that I'd live the same ostentatious lifestyle if I ever made it big, and I like to think I came close. My father told me once, 'You know, with the way you live, you've become a spoiled brat.' I replied, 'Yeah, Pop, I know it, and I'm running hard to keep it that way.' Gus Sonnenberg was really the first one who showed me that living well was the best way to

live, and I never forgot it."

[14] Billy Sandow (1884-1972) was the adopted name of Wilhelm Baumann, one of three brothers from New York City who got involved in the wrestling business. He appears to be the first to do so, in the early 20th century, as a wrestler, while his brothers, Julius — known as Jules — and Maxwell stuck to the promotional end, in New York and throughout the Midwest, respectively.

Sandow's association with Lewis began sometime about 1915 when he abandoned the mat to become a manager. Lou, who first met Sandow in the late 1930s in St. Louis, came to know a lot about the man through his friendship with Ed Lewis. "Billy Sandow's long relationship with Ed Lewis was an extremely lucrative one for both men, but Sandow had a lot to do with the money problems Ed encountered after they'd split up," Lou said. "Sandow wasn't a nice guy to be around, and he was a very tough negotiator. When they were together and drawing big bucks, they

never worked for less than 25 percent of the house. Sandow would count the house, and if it was a big crowd, he would go to the promoter and accuse him of misrepresenting the town's potential, and then he would demand 50 percent. Sometimes, if it was a really good house, he would demand 75 percent. A lot of promoters complained, but what could they do? The fans were already in their seats and ready to see the show, so the promoters had to pay up. One of the reasons Ed and Sandow could get away with that approach is that a lot of shows in their era included only two matches — the main event, with Ed, of course, and a match involving local talent — and there were no taxes, so there was usually more than enough money left over after Ed and Sandow got their cut for the promoter and the local guys to make some money, too. Still, a lot of heat built up over the years. Once in a while, if they were working for a promoter that Ed liked, he might suggest to Sandow that they take a smaller cut. Sandow would agree and then, without Ed being aware of it, go demand a higher percentage anyway. All of that came back to bite

Ed after he and Sandow ended their association because a lot of promoters blamed Ed. He was still a popular draw, but his price went way down when he no longer had Sandow to do the negotiating. Some promoters refused to use him at all unless he agreed to work for next to nothing. It was their payback for the days when Sandow was gouging them.

"Ed loved to reminisce about his days with Sandow, and I have to say he never expressed any regret to me about their relationship. Sandow did have one habit that Ed really disliked, though, and I saw it myself when Sandow was involved with Tom Packs in the St. Louis promotion in the late 1930s. Ed once told me, 'For some reason, Sandow didn't like to see harmonious relations between wrestlers, and he would try to concoct stories to cause them to fall out. Maybe it was a carryover from his own days as a wrestler, in the early 1900s, when shoots were more common and a wrestler really had to look out for himself. He would tell me unflattering stories about this or that

guy, and I'd check them out for myself and discover that Sandow was lying. He always wanted me to go out and work over my opponents and beat them real quick, but that was bad for business. If I'd done that, I would have run out of opponents who were willing to work with me. If it was a non-wrestler who I happened to like — Gus Sonnenberg and Wayne Munn, neither of whom could wrestle a lick, immediately come to mind — I'd go out there and carry them through a match and make some money for all of us, but Sandow could never see the point.' I was familiar with what Ed was talking about because Sandow used to come around the gym in St. Louis when I was a kid and try that same kind of stuff. He'd say things like, 'Don't trust this guy because he's not your friend,' and if you listened to him, it could spoil things down the road. If two wrestlers got along okay, they'd usually have good matches because they trusted each other and would cooperate in the ring. If they didn't trust each other, though, they'd crowbar or work stiff in the ring — what we called cement-mixer matches. You'd think a guy

like Sandow would have learned enough over the years to promote tranquility instead of disharmony, which would have put money in his pocket, too, but he just wasn't that kind of guy."

[15] "Marcus Griffin was a newspaper guy who worked in Toot Mondt's office in the 1930s until he was canned, so he got his revenge in 1937 when he wrote a book called Fall Guys, which was an expose of the wrestling industry," said Lou. "One of the guys mentioned in the book was Dan Parker, a writer with the New York Daily Mirror, who wrote a lot of embarrassing stuff about wrestling that Jack Pfefer fed him. One night after the book came out, Parker and Griffin ran into each other in a bar. Griffin proceeded to tell Parker that he was a fool, a sucker, that Pfefer was using him for his own purposes — which was about half-true — to get back at Mondt, who had aced him out of the New York office. Parker was a big guy, a real bruiser, and he socked Griffin, breaking his nose. There was a photographer there from the Daily Mirror who happened to witness all this, and

he got a shot of Griffin sprawled on the floor. The next day's issue of the Daily Mirror ran the photo with a cutline that said, 'The real Fall Guy, Marcus Griffin.' I saw clippings of that photo in a lot of wrestling offices over the years. Griffin's book didn't help the business, and a lot of people were happy to see him get punched."

Lou relied heavily on Fall Guys for many of the details in this chapter about Ed Lewis' early wrestling career, and wrestling historians who read the earlier versions of Hooker have challenged much of it, like his statement that the 1921 match between Lewis and Stecher was a legitimate contest. Fall Guys was an interesting read, especially for its time, but it also had many inaccuracies. One could address the disputed points one by one, or even engage in a wholesale rewrite of the chapter, but then it would no longer be Lou's voice. Lou himself once said, on an Internet message board, that he was not trying to write an authoritative history of pro wrestling — an almost impossible task, he believed, given the

secretive nature of the business and the absence of written records — but was relating its history the way he lived it and remembered it. A couple of the more egregious mistakes have been eliminated from this version, but otherwise, it remains Lou's version of events. Anyone seeking a reliable history of the life of Ed Lewis and pro wrestling's machinations in the 1920s and 1930s is encouraged to check out Tim Hornbaker's excellent 2007 history, National Wrestling Alliance, which devotes an entire chapter to Lewis. The Lou Thesz message board on wrestlingclassics.com, where Thesz was an active participant until his death in 2002, also is an excellent source of information and opinion for those patient enough to search the archived messages.

Chapter 5 Endnotes

[16] Lou was often asked to compare Santel and George Tragos as hookers. He said the biggest

difference between the two was "the intensity that motivated George." Santel, he said, was "just doing what he loved … He was so damn good he didn't have to take himself seriously." According to Lou, Ed Lewis agreed with his assessment of Santel. "They had worked out together when both men were in their primes, and Ed said he couldn't get the guy off his back — which is really saying something because not many people ever got behind Ed Lewis."

[17] Evelyn Katharine Ernst was a pretty south St. Louis girl whose parents were close friends with Lou's parents. Her father owned a prosperous newspaper distribution business, and it was his plan, once his daughter married Lou, to eventually turn the business over to him. "We'd been dating for about a year, and our parents were pushing us to get married," Lou said. "In those days, a lot of people believed you should marry young, and if you waited too long you were looked upon as either an old maid or a bum. When the California opportunity came along in 1936, I told her I'd

marry her once I got back, and I kept my word." According to city records, they were married March 22, 1937, in a Catholic ceremony. Because of his age — he was not yet 21 — his mother had to sign a permission form for the marriage license.

Chapter 6 Endnotes

[18] Lou said many times that the summer of 1937 was one of the happiest periods of his life. His parents and several other South St. Louis families owned a fishing camp on several acres on the Meramec River south of St. Louis, and Lou established a training camp there. "They were European immigrants, and their beer and wine were important to them. They'd bought the place on the river during the Prohibition years so they'd have a place to drink their homebrew in privacy on weekends," he said. "Once Prohibition ended (in 1933), the property wasn't used very much, except

for vegetable gardens, so Pop and I built a wrestling ring in the yard, under these huge sycamore trees, early in 1937. George Tragos had gone East for a while to work as an enforcer for Jack Pfefer, so we were pretty much on our own when it came to training. I lined up five or six journeymen boys who were good performers and invited them to live at the camp, rent-free, when they were in town. The place had a big clubhouse with a wide porch all the way around it, plenty of sleeping room, and we certainly never wanted for food, so it was a perfect set-up because it also offered privacy. During the day, we would work on our performing — not actual wrestling, but trying different things to add excitement to our matches. We also set trot lines in the river, which was full of catfish and bass, and we had some huge fish fries on Sundays after what amounted to public workouts. A lot of wrestlers took to dropping by then, and my parents and their friends would bring homemade beer and wine, and people just mingled. It was a very relaxed and happy atmosphere, one of the best times of my life, and

even Tom Packs surprised us by dropping by a couple of times. That camp was like my own private cathedral."

It was during this period that Lou got on the mat for the final time with his original trainer — his father. "Pop was visiting the camp one day, watching us work out, and I guess he had had a couple too many beers. He said to me, 'C'mon, let's go for a while, just for old-time sake,' so I agreed. Which was a pretty stupid thing on my part because Pop was never more than just an average amateur at his best," Thesz said. "So we rolled around for a little while, and, of course, I had to show him what I could do, and I ended up breaking a couple of his ribs. I was so ashamed of myself, but Pop was actually proud of me. He knew just enough about wrestling to see how far I'd come, and he even boasted later to people about what I'd done to him. He never tried to get on the mat with me again, though, and he never again said anything critical about my choice of a profession. The funny thing about that day was when we realized he

was hurt. While I was helping him to his feet, he said, with utter seriousness, ‘Well, I believe I’ve taught you all I can.’ I just nodded. I wasn’t sure whether he was trying to be funny."

[19] It wasn’t all roses for Lou during this period. "We were working one of the circuits, Indianapolis to Atlanta to Chattanooga, a little over 500 miles in all," he said. "The promoter in Atlanta paid each of us $15, and that was supposed to cover our transportation, which it didn’t. I finally rebelled after a couple of months and insisted on a minimum of $25, and I told I’d lead a walkout of the wrestlers if he didn’t agree. Well, the promoter paid us what we wanted that night, but he punished me by refusing to use me again, and he also complained to Tom Packs that I was causing trouble in the dressing room. Packs eventually fixed the situation, after Ray Steele intervened and said the Atlanta promoter was indeed screwing us, and we got our $25 guarantee, but not until I’d suffered a loss of income for a while. What really hurt me, though, is that I was

alone in standing up to the promoter. A dozen other guys were getting screwed, but not a single one of them would back me up. I heard later that some of them were actually taking credit for 'fixing the Atlanta problem,' and that hurt me. That was a bitter lesson for me."

[20] According to Lou, he and Zaharias became close friends after they were involved in a bad automobile accident in early 1937 while returning to St. Louis from a booking in Evansville, Ind. "My head busted the windshield, cutting an artery," he said. "I didn't think I was hurt all that bad, but George nearly fainted when he looked at me. Blood was spurting all over the place, and George told me later that he thought I would bleed to death before I could get medical attention." Zaharias got him to an emergency room in time, however, and after Thesz was patched up, they continued on their way. A couple of days later, back in St. Louis, Lou said he was pulled aside by promoter Tom Packs and told that Zaharias was worried that Thesz was going to sue

him. "Our business had its share of low-lifes who definitely would have done it, just to make a buck, but I wasn't the suing type," Lou said. "Besides, George had been doing me a favor by giving me a lift to St. Louis, so I looked him up immediately and told him to stop worrying. He really appreciated that, and we became really good friends as a result."

[21] The title was known as the Midwest Wrestling Association title, one of several "world" championships in existence at the time. By the 1940s, it would have credibility in an area stretching from Kansas City to Columbus, Ohio.

[22] Everette Marshall (1905-1973) had a solid career in pro wrestling from the late 1920s into the 1940s, and appeared in main-event matches in most of the nation's major cities. Lou said Marshall "was a great pro wrestler, but the reality of the situation in 1937 is that he wasn't drawing big money. No one was, which is why I got a chance at the title. I'd been on many cards with

him by then and had a good relationship with him, and I have to say he was a complete professional about dropping the title to me." Several years later, after Marshall had pretty much moved out of the wrestling spotlight and begun to devote more of his time and attention to his extensive farming operations in Colorado, he and Thesz crossed paths in Pueblo, Colorado. "He paid me the highest compliment one wrestler can pay another, and I've never forgotten it," Lou said. "He was semi-retired at the time and living in La Junta, about 50 miles or so from Pueblo, where I was wrestling in the main event one night. Marshall showed up at the door of the auditorium with a party of … oh, maybe 50 people, most of them his neighbors, and he had brought them specifically to see me wrestle. He wouldn't accept any passes, and he insisted on paying for the entire bunch. We had an expression in our business we'd use when we wanted to show our admiration for a fellow wrestler: 'I'd buy a ticket to see him.' That's what Marshall was doing that night, and I have to say this display of respect on his part meant the world

to me. Professional wrestling was all about box office, but mutual respect among the wrestlers is what kept most of us going."

[23] Paul Bowser, a former wrestler who became one of the powers in the national pro wrestling scene, controlled another of the credible "world" titles, known then as the American Wrestling Association [AWA]. Casey's win over Thesz would effectively merge the two titles for a while.

Chapter 7 Endnotes

[24] It was six months, to be exact, before Lou returned to the ring, and it was almost another six before he could move fluidly while wrestling.

[25] From July 10, 1942, until he entered the Army in January 1945, Lou wrestled exclusively in Texas, a total of 130-plus dates, a fact that no doubt kept him out of the national title picture. He

did not appear in a ring outside of Texas until May 8, 1945, when he wrestled in Tacoma, Washington, near Fort Lewis, where he was stationed at the time. He wrestled throughout the Northwest — mostly in Portland, Bremerton, Seattle, Calgary and Vancouver — until the end of the year. By March 1946, he was wrestling out of the St. Louis office while on leaves from the Army before finally returning to Texas and accepting some dates while serving out his Army commitment at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio.

Chapter 8 Endnotes

[26] Willard Rowe (Wild Bill) Longson (1906-1982) was one of pro wrestling's top attractions throughout much of the 1940s and, according to Lou, "pretty much single-handedly kept the wrestling business alive during the World War II years." A former boxer — he was an AAU champion in the Rocky Mountain region in 1927,

1928, and 1931; his first pro match was a first-round knockout loss to Jack Dempsey — he switched to pro wrestling in 1931 in his hometown of Salt Lake City, where he was trained by a top pro, Ira Dern, and eventually settled, in 1939, in St. Louis. He was pro wrestling's first "heel" champion, holding the National Wrestling Association's heavyweight title three times during the 1940s. He also holds the distinction of recording more wins over Thesz — 13, according to several accounts — than any other wrestler. From their first meeting in 1936 through the 1950s, they wrestled close to 50 matches, almost all main events. "We were box-office gold," Thesz once said. "It was one of those rare pairings that you could take anywhere and draw a big crowd."

[27] Lou appears to have added a zero to the actual purchase price, probably just for effect. According to documents in the possession of Bill Longson's son, Dick Longson, the purchase price was $33,500. In a way, though, Lou was

close to the mark in saying the price was $360,000. In "constant dollars," which measures the value of the dollar when adjusted for inflation, that $33,500 would be equivalent to a little more than $293,000 today. Another interesting tidbit, also provided by Dick Longson, explains how his father came to be one of Thesz's partners in the promotion. A year earlier, in April 1947, when he was scheduled to take the National Wrestling Association heavyweight title from "Whipper" Billy Watson, Lou could not come up with the $12,000 security deposit required by Tom Packs, who in effect "owned" the title. Longson, who had dropped the title to Watson two months earlier, still had his deposit on Packs' books. "My dad loaned Lou the money," says Longson, by leaving his earlier deposit with Packs, who credited it to Thesz. "When Dad took the title back from Lou (in November 1947), the deposit was again credited to him. My sister and I believe that the $12,000 deposit was my dad's share of the Packs buyout … making dad, who was still a very big draw in St. Louis, a partner, kept him from jumping to Sam

Muchnick's promotion." When the sale finally took place in June 1948 and the promotion was renamed the Mississippi Valley Sports Club, Lou owned 50 percent (in his wife Fredda's name), Longson had 35 percent (his shares also were in his wife's name), while Montreal promoter Eddie Quinn, Toronto promoter Frank Tunney, and wrestler Bobby Managoff (whose wife was listed as the owner) had five percent each. To further obscure the wrestlers' involvement in the ownership, there were two sets of papers. One set was filed with the secretary of state's office, thus legally incorporating the Mississippi Valley Club, with 90 percent of the stock in the wives' names. A second, and far-less-formal document, was placed on file with the political appointees of the state athletic commission, where Lou's father, Martin Thesz, was listed as the (ghost) owner of that same 90 per cent of the shares. In 1956, Martin Thesz "retired" from the company when Longson retired from the ring and became the front man for the promotion. That same year, Lou sold his shares to his partners in the Mississippi Valley

Sports Club for $35,000, who ran it until 1959, when they closed shop and joined with Muchnick to create the St. Louis Wrestling Club. To put the money in perspective, Lou's profit, measured in constant dollars, would be equivalent to more than $275,000 in 2010.

[28] Nothing in the original manuscript of Hooker provoked more letters, e-mails, and discussion than Lou's claim he never lost a match to Buddy Rogers. The record book is clear, and the Houston newspaper reports are, too: On May 10, 1946, in Houston, one week after winning the Texas title from Rogers, Thesz — who was still in the Army — lost the title back to Rogers in a 90-minute time-limit match that ended with Rogers winning the only fall. Years later, when he was pressed about it on various wrestling message boards, Lou stuck to his story and claimed the newspapers didn't always get things right. Still, there are those newspaper stories, and it's likely, given the popularity of wrestling in Houston during that era, that readers would have called the papers about a

"wrong" result and demanded a correction … which never appeared. Interestingly, no one disputed Thesz on the point about why he refused to put Rogers over. In fact, a number of wrestlers from that era said they'd heard the story themselves about Rogers' unkind comments about Ed Lewis, so it was apparently widespread knowledge in the wrestling business. Lou said the incident occurred while he was on two weeks leave from the Army and working some dates in the St. Louis territory. His record book has the two of them appearing on the same card — but not against each other — on March 26, 1946, in Louisville, two months before the Houston match. The following night, March 27, they wrestled a 90-minute draw (it was the first time they'd ever wrestled each other) in Evansville, Indiana. It seems likely this is the road trip that Lou was referring to. One further note: Lou said Rogers was predictably frustrated over the years with Lou's refusal to give him a win and would occasionally try to pull "funny stuff" in their matches to get himself over. One incident

apparently occurred in Chicago in the early 1950s, in a match refereed by boxing legend Jack Dempsey (probably their Jan. 26, 1951, match, which was televised and is available on DVD). According to Lou, Rogers went to Dempsey shortly before the bell and tried to change the finish — the match was supposed to go to a draw — without telling Lou. Dempsey, a close friend of Lou's for many years, was suspicious, so he checked with Lou, who informed him that nothing had changed.

Chapter 9 Endnotes

[29] Actually, both clubs continued to run separate shows until 1959 … but not really. "As far as the fans were concerned, they still had two promotions to choose from, mine and Sam's," Lou said. "We each ran every other week, so we never bumped head to head. Sometimes we'd even move talent from one club to the other. I'm pretty sure a lot of

people figured it out — that there was really only the one promotion — but no one ever complained because the quality of the product in the ring was consistently good."

[30] Orville Brown (1908-1981) is one of the forgotten stars of pro wrestling who was a national star through the 1930s and most of the 1940s. According to various accounts, the Kansas native and one-time rodeo performer was working as an apprentice to a blacksmith in 1929 when a wrestling coach spotted him and encouraged him to try the pro ranks. Brown decided to give it a shot, and, after some training and some valuable on-the-job experience in the carnivals, the strapping, agile youth was soon headlining — and winning — bouts throughout Kansas. In 1933, he moved east to Baltimore, and became a popular attraction along the eastern seaboard, appearing against many of the top stars of that era, including Jim Londos and Everette Marshall. During the mid- to late 1930s, he was appearing in major wrestling towns like Atlanta, Houston, and St. Louis. He got

involved in the promotional end of the business in the early 1940s in Kansas City and soon was claiming a version of the world heavyweight championship.

Lou Thesz and Orville Brown had already crossed paths by then — their first recorded match together came in early 1937 — and there's little doubt, certainly not on Lou's part, their rivalry was not exactly a friendly one. "He was a good worker, but I never thought much of him as a polished wrestler," Lou once said. "He was working on top pretty much wherever he appeared, and that's where I wanted to be, so it was perfectly natural some heat developed between us."

That heat intensified in the late 1940s when Brown sided with Sam Muchnick in the promotional war for dominance in St. Louis. "Sam came very close to winning that war, and I wasn't feeling very charitable towards anyone who helped him." Years later, in a letter to wrestling historian Steve Yohe which the researcher posted on the

Wrestling Classics message board, Brown's son, Richard, claimed the original plan to settle their differences called for a shooting match between Brown and Thesz in St. Louis, but Thesz changed his mind. "If Dad lost, he would just wrestle other places and still be the champion everywhere else, and they would have 'killed' wrestling in St. Louis," Richard Brown wrote. "If he won, which Dad expected (to do), Lou would no longer be champion in his own town or anywhere else." Whatever the facts, Brown and Thesz did agree to a program in which one would win the title and they would follow up with rematches all over the country for a year before switching the title to the other man. "Obviously, they would make a mint," Brown wrote, before adding the obvious: "So the accident cost them both a lot of money." More importantly, it also cost Brown his career. As noted, Brown was partially paralyzed and had a difficult recovery. He tried to return to the ring in 1950 while he was promoting in Wichita, but his run lasted only a couple of matches. He remained in wrestling, exclusively as

a promoter, until his retirement in 1964.

[31] The San Antonio match with Boesch appears to have been on Dec. 20, 1950, which is the only recorded Thesz-Boesch match in which the NWA title was at stake, and it's likely what Lou described occurred in the third fall. A newspaper account of the match said it went three falls, with Thesz winning the first one with a press, Boesch winning the second with a sleeper hold, and Thesz winning the third one with an airplane spin and press. What's indisputable about his account, though, is that he had indeed been "pulled through a keyhole" on the tour; he had worked long matches leading up the San Antonio booking with two hard-working opponents — with "Wild Bill" Longson in Fort Worth on the 18th and then Wladek "Killer" Kowalski in Dallas on the 19th — and he was probably looking for a slower-paced night with Boesch. For his part, Boesch never denied what happened that night, although he never discussed it publicly at any length beyond telling wrestling historian Dave Meltzer he "regretted" the incident.

Chapter 10 Endnotes

[32] According to Lou, Nick Elitch probably wouldn't have made his talent-scouting visit to South America in 1948 if it hadn't been for an incident that occurred one night in Evansville, Indiana, a year or so earlier. "Nick went over the top rope in a match and struck the ring apron, which was raw exposed wood, another one of those examples of a promoter not caring anything about his wrestlers' health," Lou said. "He got a serious infection and was hospitalized. His surgeon, Dr. Ralph Wilson, was a highly-respected guy. He had been a star wrestler in college and an accomplished pro wrestler, so Nick got the best treatment possible. Wilson didn't charge him anything, and Nick's only financial obligation was his medication. But Nick didn't have a dime to his name, so the wrestlers who were working Evansville would pass the hat among themselves in the dressing room each week and chip in what they

could to help Nick with his expenses. That was a serious financial drain for many of them because they weren't making a lot of money, but everyone liked Nick and wanted to help. Nick's weekly take was about $200, which was decent money at the time, so he was able to get by while he recovered. Meanwhile, he had developed a good relationship with one of his nurses, and he was telling her all kinds of lies — that he was really related to European royalty, that he would take her to Europe one day, that kind of crap. She bought it, though, and ended up borrowing money from her parents and selling her jewelry to help him out. Once Nick had cleaned her out, he skipped town. When the promoter and the wrestlers heard about it, the shit hit the fan. Some of the wrestlers were really struggling to make a living, and here he had taken their money as well as the nurse's. We soon heard that Nick had gone to South America, and everyone agreed it was probably a good decision because he certainly wouldn't have been welcome in any dressing rooms in the U.S. Nobody heard anything about Nick Elitch

until 1948 when he turned up in the U.S. with Rocca. Toots Mondt and his New York partners steal Rocca away from him, so Nick goes back to South America and steals Johnny Valentine away from the Zbyszko brothers. Johnny and Nick come back to the States and are working the Seattle area, with Nick acting as Johnny's manager, when I come through there. I'd heard good things about Johnny by then, but we'd never met, so I made a point of looking him up when I was there. My primary interest was in seeing for myself whether he was any good, but I also wanted to make him aware of what kind of person he was involved with. Once we got a chance to visit, I told him the Evansville story, which he hadn't heard. 'Nick's got a lot of heat on him with a lot of people in this business because of what he did, and that can't help you if you want to get ahead,' I told him. He obviously got the message because I heard a short while later that he had broken away from Nick, who once again dropped out of sight. Maybe he went back to South America, I don't know. Good riddance, is what I say."

[33] According to the Houston newspapers, the third fall actually ended with Rocca being counted out of the ring while lying unconscious on the floor outside the ring, where Thesz had indeed dumped him with a Greco-Roman backdrop.

[34] Verne Gagne became a very wealthy man in the pro-wrestling industry as a wrestler and promoter, with his American Wrestling Association, but Lou said Gagne almost quit the business in the early 1950s. "We had a very hot program going, and a large part of that was because he got a very big push on TV from Chicago promoter Fred Kohler," said Thesz, "whose show was broadcast throughout the country. I assumed he was doing pretty well, but Verne once told me he came close to getting out of the business at the time because he wasn't making any money at it. What changed his mind, he said, was a date we worked together in Houston, in the fall of 1950, where (promoter Morris) Sigel paid him $900. He said it was the first time he had made any real money, so he decided to stick it

out. That really surprised me because we'd worked some good houses in Chicago, so I figure Kohler must not have been paying him anything. That's a funny way to treat your star."

[35] A Chicago boy who wrestled for the University of Illinois, Ralph (Ruffy) Silverstein (1914-1980) was the NCAA champion in 1935 at 175 pounds. Although heavily favored to repeat as champion in 1936, he was one of several wrestlers who failed to reach the tournament in Lexington, Virginia, because a flood halted all rail travel. He became a pro in 1937 and was pushed hard in Chicago as a home-town favorite, but he had limited success as a main-event attraction elsewhere, in part because of his size — he weighed 225 in his prime but was only 5-foot-8 — and a rather colorless in-the-ring personality. Some reports say Silverstein also worked at times as a "policeman" for Buddy Rogers. After his pro career, he became a teacher and devoted himself to teaching wrestling in the Boys' Clubs of Chicago.

[36] Leo Joseph Nomellini (1924-2000) had a good run in pro wrestling and probably could have achieved superstar status. He certainly had the tools — size (6-foot-3, 265 pounds), speed, personality, and solid amateur credentials. During his 14-year run, though, he was exclusively a part-time performer. Pro wrestling couldn't compete with his first love, football, where he became a legend at both the college and professional levels. An ethnic like Lou, the Italian-born Nomellini was raised in a tough neighborhood on Chicago's West Side. He didn't play organized sports during his youth because he was working in a foundry to help support his family. His introduction to football came in 1942, during World War II, when he enlisted in the Marines and was recruited — because of his size and athleticism — to play on the team at Cherry Point, North Carolina. After his discharge in 1946, he enrolled at the University of Minnesota and was a four-year starter on the football team, playing both offensive and defensive tackle, and was named an All-American twice. He also wrestled, finishing

second in the heavyweight division of the Big Ten wrestling tournament in 1949, losing in the finals to another future pro wrestling star, Dr. Bill Miller, of Ohio State, and was a shot putter and the anchor man on the 440-yard relay team in track. In 1950, he became the first-ever draft pick of the San Francisco 49ers. Amazingly, he did not miss a game for the next 14 years, and played in a then-NFL record 174 consecutive regular-season games. He also was named All-Pro 10 times. (He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1969 and the College Football Hall of Fame in 1977.)

Minneapolis promoter Tony Stecher, who was instrumental in the pro wrestling career of another University of Minnesota pro football legend, Bronko Nagurski, signed Nomellini to a contract in 1950 and debuted him a week later. Later that year, when Nomellini reported to the San Francisco 49ers, he switched his allegiance to San Francisco promoter Joe Malcewicz and was an immediate box-office sensation in that territory. In

1953, Nomellini and Thesz wrestled each other for the first time, and the response at the gate set a city record for San Francisco. Their rematch four months later did even better, selling out the Cow Palace and setting an indoor attendance record for California. Malcewicz believed he had a gold mine in Nomellini and began pushing the NWA to consider Nomellini as Thesz's eventual replacement as champion. His efforts culminated in a famous March 1955 match in San Francisco between the two men that some researchers believe was the kickoff to a calculated effort by the NWA to run two champions at the same time. The three-fall match ended with Thesz getting disqualified and Nomellini claiming the title. The following day, Sam Muchnick issued a statement saying the title could not change hands on a disqualification; the rule had been instituted in October 1953, he said, at the annual meeting of NWA members. His statement was not well-received in the press, or in the office of the California State Athletic Commission, which complained in a letter to Muchnick that Thesz's

"conduct was anything but that of a champion." The letter accused Thesz of deliberately kicking Nomellini at the conclusion of the third fall, which violated the commission's rules, and further accused the NWA champion of running for the ropes in the face of Nomellini's assaults and refusing to mix it up until ordered to do so by referee Mike Mazurki. The commission demanded that Nomellini be declared the winner … which wasn't going to happen, of course, because the match had unfolded exactly according to the plan.

And what exactly was the plan? According to correspondence between Muchnick and Malcewicz, it was a 30- to 90-day program in which the NWA would book Nomellini around the country in showcase matches in return for a booking fee to be shared with Malcewicz. Nomellini would be billed at each stop as the "claimant" to the NWA title and the program was to end in St. Louis with a rematch with Thesz. In addition, Malcewicz had posted a $10,500

cashier's check with the NWA as a guarantee that Nomellini would appear for the rematch. The correspondence doesn't spell it out, but it seems likely that Malcewicz's money was simply buying Nomellini a national tryout in NWA cities to see how the public responded to him. If the response was good, then maybe Nomellini was indeed worth considering as Thesz's successor.

One thing the correspondence file does make clear, though, is that Nomellini's run was not a success. He did not draw well, in large part because fans outside of San Francisco really didn't know much about him. In some of the major NWA towns, like Houston, Dallas, and Los Angeles, the response was nothing special, and some promoters in other important NWA cities — Chicago, for instance — did not want to use him at all. (Another problem for Muchnick was that some promoters, despite his insistence that Nomellini be booked as the title "claimant," advertised him as the new NWA champion. His correspondence files include a stern letter to Honolulu promoter Al

Karasick, who not only advertised Nomellini as champion, but also publicly criticized the disqualification rule. "This rule was voted on in October 1953, and you were one of the members voting in favor of the rule," he reminded Karasick. Later in the same letter, Muchnick said this: "Whenever you get into trouble you always call upon the Alliance for help, and that help has been forthcoming. Now you are shading the publicity to suit yourself. I, therefore, ask you now to change this method of publicity. If you don't, especially in view of the fact that you voted for this rule in the first place, I am going to recommend that you be suspended from this organization." Karasick apparently got the message because he remained on the NWA membership list for several more years.)

As for Nomellini himself, he was discouraged by the poor box-office response, and he was clear in his comments to both Malcewicz and Muchnick that he did not like the grueling schedule and spending so much time away from his

family. Finally, if there were indeed plans to make him NWA champion, they were abandoned when Nomellini announced he intended to re-sign with the San Francisco 49ers and continue his football career. (Muchnick stated flatly in a letter to Malcewicz that Nomellini would be "cheapening the wrestling title" by continuing to claim it while playing football.) In the end, Muchnick probably regretted going along with Malcewicz's plan because it only brought him a lot of trouble … and not very much money. The blowoff match in St. Louis, for instance, was originally planned as an outdoor show at the St. Louis Cardinals' baseball stadium, and Muchnick believed it would draw more than 20,000 fans. But the Cardinals, who initially were okay with the idea, eventually decided not to go along with the request, so Muchnick held the match at the Kiel Auditorium. The card drew 7,319 paying customers, which was a mediocre response for that city and a program that began with such high hopes. If there was an undisputed positive to the whole affair, it was the warm relationship that

developed between Thesz and Nomellini. "He was a great guy, and he was fun to work with," Thesz once said. "If I was forced to name one guy as the best football player who made a name for himself in pro wrestling, it would have to be Leo. There were a lot of them, of course, but he stood out in the pack because he could really wrestle."

Chapter 11 Endnotes

[37] Mel Traxel was almost certainly responsible for getting Lou an invitation to an important Los Angeles event in 1952, the annual Press Photographers Ball, where Thesz was photographed with an array of Hollywood stars, including the hot, young comedy team of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis. The ball, according to one account, "was a Hollywood ritual that had all the sophistication of a high school prom, only famous. In 1949" (when the first ball was held)

"the local cadre of photographers had not yet turned into a pack of multi-eyed wolves" (in other words, no paparazzi) "and the stars counted many of them as good guys whom they knew by name as Hymie and Scotty and let into their homes to photograph their children's birthday parties. The Ball was the stars' way of saying thank-you to the little people with the cameras who, in turn, could make an extra buck selling photos of the stars making fools of themselves in crazy costumes." Lou was certainly a beneficiary, too, as photos of him with many of the stars at the 1952 event went out across the country and ran in many newspapers. (Probably the most famous of the balls was the first one, in which a relatively unknown actor named Rock Hudson, wearing a gold skullcap and gold swimming trunks, appeared with his date, actress/dancer Vera-Ellen, who wore a gold bikini and gold wig. The couple covered their bodies in gold paint, completing the picture of a pair of life-sized Oscars, and the photographers went nuts over them. According to several of his biographers, the stunt and the

resulting international publicity saved Hudson's career — he was about to be released from his contract with Universal Studios — and launched him to stardom.)

[38] Lou was supposed to be paid 15 percent of the net for the match, which would have been about $12,000, but he settled for a little more than $9,000. Leone was given $6,650, out of which he paid roughly $2,200 to his booking agency.

[39] Another satisfying byproduct of the Leone match for Lou was the relationship he developed with famous broadcaster Tom Harmon (1919-1990). Harmon became a college football legend as a halfback at the University of Michigan in the late 1930s and, in 1940, after a second consecutive year as the nation's leading scorer, won the Heisman Trophy. He was a first-round draft pick of the Chicago Bears after graduating, but with the outbreak of World War II, he chose to enlist instead in the Army Air Corps, where he flew several hazardous missions and was awarded the

Silver Star. After service in World War II, Harmon became a very popular sports broadcaster, first on radio (he had done some radio play-by-play while a student at Michigan) and then television, one of the first athletes to capitalize on his fame to make the transition. (It's also worth noting that he was the father of actor Mark Harmon — NCIS, St. Elsewhere, and several others — as well as model Kelly Harmon and actress Kristin Harmon. Kristin was the first wife of teen idol and TV star Ricky Nelson and mother of twins Matthew and Gunnar Nelson, who found rock 'n' roll success themselves in the 1990s as The Nelsons.)

As related by Lou, the friendship with Harmon got off to a rocky start and almost developed into a public brawl. In the early 1950s, Harmon had a very popular Sunday afternoon talk show based in Los Angeles that featured a diverse blend of guests. One Sunday, shortly after the Leone match at Gilmore Field, Thesz was invited to appear on the show. He recalled the incident like this: "Wild

Red Berry and I were booked as guests to talk about pro wrestling, and they expected a big audience for the broadcast, in large part because the week before they'd had two California lawmakers who'd gotten into a fistfight on the air and gotten the show a lot of publicity. Red and I figured going in that we could work a program with Tom, but we didn't need to — it almost turned into the real thing. Tom didn't like wrestling, and he was very upfront about it. He was very aggressive with us and very insulting about our business and our fans, right from the start, and poor Red didn't know how to handle the situation. He backed down on the air and just sat there as Tom abused him. It was sad to see. After he finished with Red, Tom turned to me and opened by saying that he had seen me and Leone at Gilmore Field, and he stated flatly that he thought the match was a phony. I stayed cool and replied that if he didn't know any more about wrestling than some of the other subject matters on his show, then he was fleecing his audience and the people who paid him a salary. I told him, 'I've wrestled

some exhibitions, but the Leone match wasn't one of them. If you're presenting yourself as someone who's a credible observer of sports, then you're taking money under false pretenses.' You could cut the tension with a knife, and after the show, Tom said nothing to me.

"Some time later, Tom moved his show to the Skandia Restaurant on the Sunset Strip, another one of my favorite hangouts when I was on the West Coast. One day, he called the wrestling office to see if I was available to do the show. He had seen a promo that I was going to be in town. I was really surprised because there was some serious heat between us because of that first show. He didn't know it at the time he was on the air with Red and me, but I was seriously considering hitting him, or taking him to the floor, and then asking him if he thought that was fake. A little more heat from him is all it would have taken … and I bet his ratings would have soared even higher as a result. Anyway, I agreed to do the show, and it couldn't have gone any smoother. No insults, no

heat, just a pleasant chat about my life as a wrestler. But the biggest surprise came after the show when Tom pulled me aside and asked me to set aside Tuesday afternoons while I was working the area so we could have lunch together. It was a happy ending that I never could have predicted, and we actually developed a warm friendship."

For the record, Harmon played a part in the Dallas promotional war of 1953, stating more than once on his popular nationwide radio show that former Olympian Roy Dunn was a better wrestler than Thesz and that the NWA champion was ducking a challenge by Dunn and his manager, promoter Max Baumann, one of Billy Sandow's brothers. Lou laughed when recalling the episode: "Tom recognized the popularity of pro wrestling by then and had pretty much stopped bad-mouthing it to his listeners. He was simply saying those things for visibility's sake because the Dallas war was getting a little bit of national attention and he took advantage of it. We'd actually laugh about it when we got together."

Chapter 12 Endnotes

[40] Lili St. Cyr was one of the top burlesque strippers in the United States throughout the 1940s and well into the 1950s. Thesz was acquainted with her because, for a time, she had been a companion of Eddie Quinn.

"You're free to think whatever you like about strippers, of course, but they had a lot in common with the wrestlers," said Lou. "The obvious connection was that all of us were entertainers trying to earn a living with our bodies. We also worked almost exclusively at night and saw a lot of the same people — club owners, musicians, promoters — so it was perfectly natural we'd get acquainted after hours. Some of them, like Gypsy Rose Lee, were quality people, and some of them weren't, which, if you think about it, made them pretty much like the rest of society. Eddie got to know Lili in the early 1950s through his show biz

and nightclub connections, and they had a hot thing going for a while, although it was very hush-hush because Eddie, who was married, also was involved at the time with one of the dancers on Jackie Gleason's TV show.

"So I'm working the West Coast, living at the Miramar Hotel in Santa Monica, when Eddie called me one night. He said Lili was working at a nearby club and he would appreciate it if I'd extend her a little hospitality, so I called her and arranged a dinner date for a couple of nights later at the Miramar, which was quite a luxurious place. She showed up looking like a $5,000 whore — she was wearing gladiator boots and a gorgeous, custom-made gold outfit that showed off her cleavage — and I was embarrassed to be seen with her, but she was such an attractive woman that none of the other patrons seemed to mind. So we stopped off at the cocktail lounge to have a couple of drinks and chat and listen to the trio, and then we went to dinner. It was a struggle to get through our meal because she really had nothing interesting

to say, but I managed it because I knew the evening wouldn't last forever. She had said at the outset she couldn't stay long because she had a show to do, but after dinner she said she would like maybe another drink or two, so we headed back to the lounge. Well, I had nothing left to say to her — I'd pretty much talked myself out over dinner — so I decided to see if I could get a little heat with her and maybe make Eddie squirm as payback for putting me through this ordeal. 'You know, Eddie's going out with this girl from the Gleason chorus line, but I know for a fact that Eddie doesn't love her,' I said to Lili. 'Maybe you and I can cook up something that would ace her out and end up helping each other.' Well, I'd read her correctly because her ears really perked up at that, and she immediately called the bartender over and said she was buying the next round of drinks while we talked business. So I suggested to her that I put some moves on the Gleason girl and steal her away from Eddie, and then she would have Eddie all to herself. I also told her that Eddie's mother was sitting on $10 million — hell, she was really living

in a nursing home and Eddie was paying all of her bills — which Eddie stood to inherit. Lili was listening intently to all these lies, so I hit her with my bottom line: I'd get the Gleason girl out of the way in return for 10 percent of whatever she got out of Eddie. She agreed immediately. Well, she had already missed her first show, so I told her to go ahead and go, that we'd talk more later, but she said, 'To hell with them! I don't like the way they've been treating me, so screw them!' She was really getting juiced by then and she suggested we go up to my suite. I had to catch an early flight, though, so I begged off and gently eased her out to a cab, promising her that I'd be in touch real soon.

As soon as she left, I called Eddie and told him about my evening with Lili. 'She's really an amoral person,' I warned him, 'and she's only interested in your money.' Eddie laughed his ass off. 'Hell, I suspected as much myself,' he said. 'Thanks for clearing up the picture for me.'

A couple of years later, while I was working

some dates in Montreal, I walk into El Morocco, a popular nightclub that Eddie owned, and there's Lili sitting at the bar with Jimmy Orlando, a former pro hockey player who was managing the club for Eddie. Orlando was Eddie's 'beard' for a lot of years — whenever Lili and Eddie's wife were in the same room, Orlando would pretend to be Lili's date — and they'd eventually fallen for each other. I wondered if my heat with Lili had died down, so I walked over and said hello to her. 'Get away from me, you lying sonofabitch!' she said. I guess she couldn't take a joke."

[41] Rikidozan was lobbying for a Japan appearance by Thesz almost from the moment he created his own wrestling company, the Japan Pro Wrestling Promotion, in 1953. Two years later, in a letter to Sam Muchnick, Honolulu promoter Al Karasick — who had designs on Japan himself — floated the idea of a Thesz tour, and by 1956, San Francisco promoter Joe Malcewicz had signed on, too. Both had drawn big crowds in their territories using Rikidozan and were convinced a Japan tour

would be a huge success. Thesz resisted, though, for a variety of reasons, and since Rikidozan was not a member of the NWA, Muchnick could not order him to take the match. Finally, in June 1957, after a meeting in St. Louis with Rikidozan himself, Thesz agreed to terms for a nine-match tour. Rikidozan posted a $10,000 bond with the NWA for the tour — Thesz was guaranteed $7,333, and the NWA got the $2,667 balance — and plans for the tour were set in motion. Karasick would make the trip to Japan as the NWA's official representative and a tough Nebraska native named Danny "Bulldog" Plechas was tapped to serve as the referee and Thesz's "protection" for the eight singles matches, each of which ended in a draw or a Thesz victory. Tthe ninth match was a tag-team affair in which Plechas was Thesz's partner. (Plechas had a long and successful career in Texas as a wrestler and, later, as a referee and occasional booker. He was a legend among the wrestlers for the strength of his grip. According to one popular locker-room story, he once broke up a saloon brawl by ripping the seat out of a cowboy's

Levi’s with his bare hands.)

Chapter 13 Endnotes

[42] Emile "King Kong" Czaja (1909-1970) was a popular fixture of the pro wrestling scene in the Far East for almost three decades. A six-footer who often weighed more than 400 pounds, he reportedly debuted in India in 1937 and became a top attraction there and in New Zealand, Singapore and Australia, where he eventually settled. He also worked for Rikidozan in Japan in both singles and tag-team matches during the 1950s. (It’s possible that Czaja, reportedly a Hungarian, may have learned his craft in the carnivals as a young man in Europe. At least, that’s one conclusion that can be drawn from a news story, datelined Budapest, in the December 4, 1932, edition of the New York Times, which states that a "circus manager and well-known wrestler named Czaja has just paid his arrears of city taxes in a form

which recalls the use of cattle as currency by African tribes. He offered, and the city accepted, seven lions and thirteen apes from his circus for the Budapest zoo.") For the record, Thesz's NWA title was not at stake in his 1957 match with Czaja, which was scheduled for ten 10-minute rounds. The two men went the distance, winning a fall apiece, to a draw.

Chapter 14 Endnotes

[43] Lou, like his idol and mentor Ed Lewis, was always spare in his comments about the best authentic wrestlers of his era(s) and who would have given him the toughest time in a contest, but it's obvious from what he did say that Dick Hutton (1923-2003) would have ranked at or near the top of his list. "I once told Pat O'Connor that if our style of wrestling took place strictly on the mat, Hutton would have beaten all of us," said Lou.

One of Lou's favorite stories had to do with an "Olympic-style" match they staged in the mid-1950s. "There was an athletic commissioner in Pittsburgh or Philadelphia who warned us before our match that if he saw any of the 'phony' pro-style wrestling, he would stop the match and pull our licenses. Well, this guy was a typical political appointee who probably wouldn't have known a wristlock from a padlock, but I didn't want to take any chances. When I talked to Dick before our match and told him I was worried, he said, 'No problem.' We just agreed we'd wrestle what looked like a contest, and that's what we did. Sure enough, the commissioner came backstage after the match and complimented us."

Hutton, who remembered the match as taking place in Ohio, where he and Thesz appeared together several times in 1954 and 1955, laughed when recalling the match in a 2000 interview with the Wrestling Perspective newsletter. "The commissioner brought in judges, who were supposed to know amateur wrestling, to watch our

match," Hutton said. "They said afterward it was the greatest shoot … well, they called it a 'match' … the greatest match they'd ever seen."

Lou said wrestling Hutton was a learning experience for him every time they met because Hutton "had the kind of agility that you can't teach, and he could really cause you trouble if you weren't alert. This is kind of technical and hard to describe, but his major move was a switch, a go-behind that he called the 'wing-doodle,' and it was almost impossible to stop. When he would go for it, I'd have to give him an elbow in the head just to slow him down. One time we were wrestling and he did the switch on me. I somehow reversed it and sort of powered my way out, and Dick just laughed. 'I'll get you the next time,' he said. Sure enough, later in the match, I did a switch on him, but he caught me in mid-air — we were both switching at the same time — and he flipped me. He had me in a pinning position on the mat almost before I knew it, but he let me go because that wasn't what we were going for. Afterwards,

back in the dressing room, he laughed and said, 'How'd you like the ol' wing-doodle?' I told him I would have liked it better if it had been me doing it instead of him.

"A couple of years later, I think it was in Amarillo, we were working together and he caught me with it again, something that didn't happen to me very often, and he was laughing about it while we were still in the ring. I'm sure the fans were wondering what was going on. It was a great move, and I used it myself a few times, although I couldn't do it anywhere as smoothly as Dick. Still, guys would say to me afterwards, 'Where'd you learn that?' and I'd say, 'Oh, it was just something I thought up during the match.' I'm not sure Dick ever learned that I was borrowing from him, but I'm sure he would have laughed if he knew."

As for the title switch in Toronto, Lou said in the original manuscript of Hooker that Hutton was an unknown in Toronto at the time of the match and a last-minute substitute. He was probably confusing

the set-up with another program elsewhere — it was not an unfamiliar gimmick — because Hutton was already a known quantity there by then. He had been working the town for a while, doing a $1,000 challenge gimmick: Fans who wanted to challenge Hutton could earn a dollar for every minute they stayed in the ring with him, and $1,000 if they beat him. Not too many people tried. "I don't remember getting too many challengers there," Hutton said, laughing, in the Wrestling Perspective interview. In the publicity for the title match with Thesz, Hutton increased the incentive to $2,000 and waived the time limit.

[44] Another possibility for a lucrative three-way program with Assirati that was discussed involved the great Canadian wrestler, George Gordienko, whose biggest fan was Lou Thesz. Gordienko (1928-2002), a gifted amateur wrestler and weightlifter, was introduced to pro wrestling in 1946 by Joe Pazandak, who delivered him to Minneapolis promoter Tony Stecher. Pazandak became his primary trainer, and the two traveled

together throughout Stecher's territory and elsewhere — including an appearance for Sam Muchnick in 1948 when Thesz and Muchnick were running rival promotions in St. Louis — and Gordienko progressed so quickly that he seemed destined for stardom. His real love, though, was painting, which he studied while enrolled at the University of Minnesota, and it was there, during his student years, that the seeds of his future in pro wrestling were planted, at least as far as the U.S. was concerned: He was arrested while distributing Communist literature on campus and was deported. He became an international globetrotter, wrestling on top wherever he appeared and using his income to finance his art career.

In a handwritten letter to Thesz in 1991, Gordienko related what he recalled as the highlights of his career. "One of the blessings of professional wrestling in our day was the opportunity for travel. I was able to spend some time at art schools in London and visit galleries and museums all over Europe and elsewhere. It

was priceless."

A list of the places Gordienko wrestled during his career is breathtaking in its scope. In addition to "the United Kingdom, there was France, Belgium, Germany, Spain and Greece, which were good territories," he wrote, plus there were wrestling appearances in Lebanon, Kuwait, South Africa, India, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. "Some great spot shows for me were in Tehran, Tripoli, Baghdad" — where he worked in front of a crowd estimated at 100,000 people — "Zambia and Nigeria," he wrote. He retired from wrestling in 1975 after a swing through Africa — "It was a good tour," Gordienko said, "and I figured it was time to ‘call it day’" — and settled in Italy, where he pursued his love of painting and managed, in his own words, to build up "a small following." He returned to Canada in 1990, settling in Black Creek, on Vancouver Island, and lived there until his death in 2002.

Thesz and Gordienko first met in the early 1950s

when Gordienko was working for Calgary promoter Stu Hart — a famous shooter who rated Gordienko as one of the three toughest men he had ever seen — and were twice booked together in Edmonton. Thesz was so impressed — "We once worked a 60-minute draw, and I couldn't run him out of gas, which almost never happened" — that he wanted to switch his NWA title to Gordienko in 1956 when he fractured an ankle and needed some time to heal. The U.S. State Department would not allow Gordienko into the country, however, so Thesz dropped the title to "Whipper" Billy Watson instead. "George was a salty dude, one of the best I ever saw, and it's a shame we couldn't get him into the country," said Lou. "That was during the McCarthy era, though, and it just wasn't going to happen. When I got to England in 1957, he was working there with a rival group — he had come over a year earlier — so we weren't able to get together in the ring, but we saw each other socially all the time. He was working the Continent, too, so we spent some time with each other in Paris, seeing the sights and partying. One of the things

we discussed was my frustration with Assirati, who wouldn't respond to my suggestion about a three-way program with me and Dara Singh. George and I concluded that maybe what Assirati really wanted was a straight-up contest, for big money. It could have been done, too, if the promoters had come up with the cash, but they simply didn't want to deal with Assirati. I would have done it, and George liked the idea, too. We took the idea to our respective promoters and suggested they approach Assirati with it, telling him he could have me or George. Either way, he would have been contending with both of us because we would have trained each other. We actually worked out the terms where whoever got the match would pay the other a certain amount of bucks to be his training partner. It would have been a win/win deal, but it simply never got off the ground."

A final aside here about Assirati: In a physical sense, he resembled Lou's mentor and great friend, Ed (Strangler) Lewis. Wrestler Pat Barrett

recalled the following about Assirati in his own book about his career: "What amazed me about Assirati was his short legs. He wasn't very tall, probably about 5-foot-6, 5-7, but he had unbelievably long arms. In a way, for the power he had, he had the perfect build. You couldn't get under him because of his short legs, but he could reach you from a long way away. He had arms that were long enough for a guy that was about 6-foot-4."

Chapter 15 Endnotes

[45] According to Larry Matysik, who served as Sam Muchnick's right hand in the NWA office for many years, the plan to remove Rogers as champion really began in earnest when Rogers cancelled an important booking in St. Louis in September 1962. "Relations between Sam and (New York promoter) Vince McMahon were very rocky at this time because of the problems in

getting booking dates with Rogers for other NWA members," Matysik said. "McMahon was caught in the middle between Sam and Rogers" because he was the one who had to clear all of Rogers' bookings with the NWA members, and a perception arose that McMahon was withholding Rogers in favor of bookings within his own territory. "It became a serious point of contention," said Matysik.

Then, on August 31, 1962, in Columbus, Ohio, Rogers was involved a locker-room confrontation with wrestlers Karl Gotch and Dr. Bill Miller. Rogers had been scheduled to defend the NWA title against Cowboy Bob Ellis in St. Louis on September 14 in one of the biggest wrestling shows of the year, but he dropped out, claiming Gotch and Miller had injured his elbow. Muchnick was furious and called Thesz, who agreed to substitute for Rogers as a favor to his former business partner. The show sold out, with Thesz wrestling — and losing to — Ellis in the main event, and that's when Muchnick and

Thesz had their first serious talks about putting the NWA title back on Thesz.

Two months later, in November, when Rogers cancelled several more NWA appearances after he was allegedly injured in a bout with Killer Kowalski in Montreal, whatever support Rogers still had among the NWA members finally evaporated. Meanwhile, a plan to put the belt on Thesz was already in motion. "Sam sat me down in his office once and laid it all out for me," said Matysik. "He told me Lou was very reluctant to become champion again … (but) eventually he agreed because Sam persuaded him that the business — and the NWA — needed him." What followed was a series of St. Louis matches designed by Muchnick to push Thesz into the spotlight once again as a visible and viable contender for the NWA title. By December, he had beaten top stars like Don Leo Jonathan, Tarzan Tyler, Buddy Austin, Pat O'Connor, and, in a rematch, "Cowboy" Bob Ellis while drawing good crowds. After that, it was simply a matter of

getting Rogers into the ring in Toronto. (The final Muchnick touch in the program came a week before the January 24, 1963, title switch, when he had Thesz lose by disqualification to O'Connor in St. Louis. It was a brilliant piece of booking by Muchnick, said Matysik, because it set up a natural return match with O'Connor in St. Louis, only this time it would be for the title. That match, on February 15, drew a near-sellout of 11,000-plus paying customers.)

[46] Buddy Rogers' decision to part ways with Jack Pfefer caused ripples throughout the entire wrestling industry, especially in the Northeast. In a July 6, 1951, letter to Sam Muchnick, New York promoter Toots Mondt complained that Eddie Quinn was trying to book his wrestlers, including Rogers, in "our territory" with non-NWA promoters. He also said Quinn had complained to Rudy Dusek, a member of the New York office, that St. Louis had "dumped a hot potato (in Rogers) in his lap" and that he was planning to farm Rogers out to other promoters before sending him back to

St. Louis. In his response, dated July 7, Muchnick denied dumping Rogers on the Montreal office and said Quinn was "full of bunk." He went on to explain to Mondt that Rogers had approached him and Thesz after an April 13 show in St. Louis and asked the NWA office to book him. "We told him that we were not interested," Muchnick wrote. "However, [we said] that if he would take a summer vacation, not do any work, we would see what could be done. He promised by shaking hands with us. I figured on seeing Jack [Pfefer] and trying to work something out. Next thing I heard, Quinn was booking him. I later learned that Rogers had approached Kansas City and Chicago officers, also offering his services." Interestingly, Muchnick emphatically denied to Mondt that Thesz had paved the way for Rogers to work in Montreal, writing that "The Shoemaker definitely had nothing to do with the Quinn-Rogers deal, I can assure you."

[47] Over the years, Thesz resisted repeated inquiries from wrestling historians to elaborate on

the Carpentier matches of 1957, so what we're left with is what could be described as "semi-informed" speculation. What many of the respected researchers believe happened in mid- to late 1957 is that the NWA was purposefully running two champions. It's certainly clear from Sam Muchnick's correspondence that the Alliance was getting a booking fee for some of Carpentier's appearances — in which he was sometimes billed as world champion — while also earning a booking fee for Thesz' title defenses. One prominent authority on the history of pro wrestling, Dave Meltzer, says he was told by promoter Jim Barnett, who was handling Carpentier's bookings and paying the NWA a fee, that Thesz, Muchnick, promoter Eddie Quinn, and others concocted the deal. Whatever the facts, Thesz was probably an indifferent participant because he was already disgusted with the NWA and planning to tour Europe. Maybe the plan was put in place to leave the door ajar for Thesz to return as champion, if and when his European adventure was concluded. Anyone who's interested in exploring

this mess further is encouraged to visit the Lou Thesz message board on the Wrestling Classics site and read the multiple discussions about it.

[48] Rogers' actual physical condition on the night of the title switch to Sammartino remains a hot topic of discussion among wrestling historians. The only thing that seems clear is that Rogers had indeed suffered some sort of heart-related ailment in the weeks or months leading up to the match. Whether he was indeed "dragged" out of a hospital bed as Thesz — and, to be fair, many others — have claimed remains unclear. As with the Carpentier-Thesz mess mentioned above, interested readers are invited to search the Lou Thesz message board on the Wrestling Classics site and form their opinions.

[49] Sammartino, who did not attend the Chicago meeting, said in a 2001 radio interview that it was he, not Thesz, who refused the match. The match did not take place, he said, because of scheduling problems — namely, that Mondt and McMahon

wanted his services in their promotion for 17 dates every month, and Muchnick insisted on having him for at least 16 appearances each month in NWA cities. Since Sammartino himself demanded every Sunday off, he said, there was no way to accommodate both sides.

[50] Actually, there's a simple explanation for why Thesz was matched with Sammartino and given the win. According to Larry Matysik, Muchnick had learned about the New York office's plan to create its own title and put the belt on Sammartino. Muchnick wanted Thesz to have a win over Sammartino in the record books because it would lend credibility to the NWA title, so he put in the call to Tunney and told him what he wanted. In fairness to Thesz, it's possible that Tunney and Muchnick never mentioned it to him.

[51] One incident that occurred during Thesz's final run with the NWA title — his May 2, 1964, title match with Karl Gotch — deserves mention, if only because it's been the subject of a lot of

Internet message board chatter over the years. "I got badly injured in that match, and to this day, I honestly don't know what was going through Karl's mind when it happened," Thesz said. "We were working along just fine and I went for the Greco-Roman backdrop, but for some reason, Karl decided to block me. I lost my balance, and when we fell to the mat, Karl came down on top of me, hard, and fractured a couple of my ribs. A lot of guys asked me later if Karl was shooting on me, maybe trying to steal the title, and I honestly don't know if that was the case. If he had been, he could have nailed me easily at that moment because I was really hurting, but he didn't do that. Instead, we cut the match short and went right to the finish.

"Afterwards, back in the dressing room, I asked him what was going on, and he said he had just had a momentary mental lapse and had reacted instinctively when I went for the backdrop. Whatever the case, he put me on the shelf for six weeks. I did drag myself out of bed for a booking in St. Louis two weeks after the

incident, just to see if I could work, but the pain was excruciating, probably the worst I'd ever experienced. If you've ever injured your ribs, you know what I'm saying — it literally hurts to breathe.

"At the time I was living in Phoenix, where I owned a small resort hotel, the Casa Siesta Lodge, and that's where I holed up. Located at the foot of Camelback Mountain, the lodge was a nice little property with a 24-unit hotel on six acres, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a great kitchen, and stables with six horses for the guests. We had a lot of parties there during the six to eight years that I owned it, but there was no partying going on for me at that time. I took one of the hotel rooms for myself, closed the drapes, dragged a mattress onto the floor, and that's where I stayed until I'd healed enough to return to the ring. I ate room-service meals and pretty much ignored the rest of the world. Mike DiBiase, a great amateur from Nebraska who became a great pro, was living in Phoenix at the time, and he would drop by

occasionally to check on me, but that was it in terms of visitors. I didn't want to see anybody, not even my wife and kids. It was a miserable time for me, one of the gloomiest times of my life."

Some readers speculated on the Internet after Hooker was first published as to why Gotch, who was unquestionably one of the top hookers in pro wrestling, got so little mention in the book. A few even suggested Thesz was disrespecting his colleague. The truth is actually much simpler. "I called Karl when we were doing the book and asked him to share some biographical information, and he flat-out said he didn't want to appear in it because he was writing a book of his own," said Lou. "I was surprised because we'd been cordial with each other over the years and had even worked as a tag team in Japan. It's what he wanted, though, so I backed off."

Karl Charles Istaz (1924-2007) was born in Antwerp, Belgium, and represented his country in the 1948 Olympics in both freestyle and Greco-

Roman. After training at the legendary "Snake Pit" in Wigan, England, he became a pro, soon establishing himself as one of Europe's best. In 1959 he came to the United States, where two years later he adopted the name Karl Gotch. After mixed success in the States — he had a low-key personality in the ring and was not especially effective in interviews — he went to Japan, where he became a legend with the fans as both a wrestler and a trainer of many future stars.

In a 1990 interview with writer Jeff Bowdren, Gotch said the following about injuring Thesz in their Detroit match: "If I had wanted to really hurt him, he wouldn't have walked out of there. Thesz was a glamour boy. Boy, did he hate to look up (lose a match)."

Commenting about the interview in a letter later that year, Thesz said the following about Gotch: "Karl, like so many over-the-hill athletes, is prone to get tougher as the years go by. I suppose there is a little 'Walter Mitty' in most of us … particularly

when one is walking in the parade instead of leading it. … I respect his ability as a wrestler and coach. He was a very good gym wrestler but never learned to really work properly. I so wish that he was as colorful as he was credible in the gym. If so, we could have made a lot of money working programs in many places."

On another occasion, Lou told the following story about Gotch: "He was a very hard-nosed guy and a fantastic wrestler, but he never had a lick of business sense. Once he asked me about working with Rikidozan. 'Did Riki ever try to block you?' he asked.

"'Sure,' I replied, 'why do you ask?'

"'Well, he tried to block me, but I straightened him out,' Karl said.

"'So you blocked him, huh?' I said. 'Let me ask you something, Karl. How many times did Riki ask you back?'

"'Oh, he never did,' Karl said.

"I nodded, and then said, 'Well, doesn't that tell you something?'"

The point eluded him completely. It was more important to Karl to show Riki, who was never much of a wrestler, anyway, that he was the better man than it was to make money."

Chapter 16 Endnotes

[52] Another important venue for Thesz during the 1970s was Mexico. In the original Hooker manuscript, Lou talked at great length about his experiences there, but we ended up cutting much of it when we saw how long the book had become. Here, with some polishing, is the part that was cut:

"I love Mexico. By the time I was invited to wrestle there in 1977, I'd been in and out of the

country dozens of times, usually on fishing vacations, and it felt almost like a second home to me, so I was more than happy to go back when the country's top promoter called and said he wanted me. I was wrapping up my in-the-ring career by then, but their offer was too good to ignore. A lot of their guys weren't making any money, but I got $1,000 a week, and you could live like a king there on that kind of money in those days.

"What they wanted from me was a program setting up an eventual title match with one of their rising stars, El Canek. They wanted to put their heavyweight title on him, but he was a young, unpolished wrestler at the time and wasn't ready for the top spot. Once I got there, I worked in private with Canek, showing him some things and helping polish his wrestling. I liked him immediately — he had a great body and a great attitude — but the promoters were correct in thinking he wasn't ready to be their champion. I stayed about a month, worked on top on some of their shows, and when it was time to go home, I

was the promotion's heavyweight champion. Honestly, I don't even remember now who I beat for the title, or whether I simply 'won' it in the back room when someone handed me the belt, but I do remember that I left for home with their championship belt in my luggage and their promise they'd have me back when El Canek was ready. It struck me as a strange deal, but their money was good, and old friends like Rito Romero assured me the promoter could be trusted. They treated me extremely well while I was there, including a week at one of Acapulco's top hotels with all expenses paid, and I certainly had nothing to prove and nothing to lose, so I just returned home and waited for the call.

"Finally, a year later, they phoned and said they were ready. So I returned to Mexico with the belt and wrestled a couple of shows for them before dropping it to El Canek in front of 22,000 paying customers, a sell-out, at the Palacio des Sportas in Mexico City. My payoff for the match, if I remember correctly, was $3,000, a nice little

payday. I returned there in 1981 and wrestled as part of a six-man tag team affair, but it was more like a guest appearance than anything else. For all intents and purposes, the 1978 title switch with El Canek was my last important appearance as a wrestler in that country."

Chapter 17 Endnotes

[53] It was former heavyweight boxing champ Jack Sharkey (1902-1994) who hung the affectionate "Lulu" nickname on Lou, and it stuck. A lot of Thesz's friends, and even some family members, used the nickname when addressing him or talking about him. The two men met in 1936 during Lou's first tour of California. Lou said, "He'd fought 'em all — people like Jack Dempsey, Max Schmeling, Tommy Loughran, Carnera, of course, and a young Joe Louis, who beat him and sent him into retirement — but he was a friendly, approachable guy, and we hit it off from the start. He had a

reputation for having a hot temper, but I always found him to be an easy guy to be around. He was another ethnic, a Lithuanian who was raised in Boston.

"It probably sounds funny, but the strongest bond between us was we both loved to fish. One of my happiest memories was a trip Jack talked me into making during the 1950s when we ran across each other in Montreal. Jack had become acquainted with a guy who was involved in one of the country's biggest timber operations, and the guy had taken Jack along on a business trip into the northern wilds to check out some of the company's holdings. Jack was so excited that his eyes almost bugged out of his head as he was telling me about it. 'Lulu, you absolutely have to see this place,' he told me. 'It's so far back in the woods that you can walk for days and never see another person. The lakes up there are practically overflowing with fish, and you'll get arm-weary just reeling them in. This guy has said I can use the company's cabin any time I want. All I have to do is call

him.' Well, like I said, I was a sucker for fishing, and it sounded almost too good to be true, so I had to see it. Jack made the call, I cleared my schedule for a week, and off we went. To make a long story short, it was everything Jack said it was, and more. We drove north from Montreal until we ran out of road, then a caretaker/guide who worked for the timber company met us and led us the rest of the way on foot along a logging road for a couple of hours. The cabin was a sturdy, rustic thing that could house something like a dozen people — there was no telephone or even a radio, which was a blessing — but after the caretaker dropped us off, saying he'd return in three days, it was only Jack and me. Like Jack had promised, we never saw another human being until he returned. It was as close to perfection as anything I ever experienced. There were three lakes within strolling distance of our front door and it was like the fish were competing to see who could get to our flies first. We'd stop fishing early in the afternoon, because we were only taking as much as we knew we could eat — and believe me, we

were throwing a lot of them back — and we'd go back and cook up our catch. Then we'd sit outside and sip whiskey and tell lies until the sun went down. I wasn't wearing a watch — you didn't need one up there — so I'm guessing when I say we turned in before eight o'clock each night, and we were up with the sun each morning. I can honestly say I never slept so well in my life, and it was very hard to leave when the guide returned for us. Jack and I had that kind of comfort with each other that you have only with your closest friends, and we didn't say much during the drive back to Montreal. We were on the outskirts of the city when Jack looked at me, grinned, and said simply, 'Told ya.' The sad thing is that we never went back."

[54] One of the most popular heavyweight champions in history, Jack Dempsey (1895-1983), was an important influence upon Thesz in terms of how to live one's life in the public eye. "Jack was a real class guy, a gentleman and an authentic 'man of the world' who was loaded with humility, and

he couldn't have been kinder to me," Lou said. "I'd met him early in my career through Ed Lewis, who'd been a close friend of Jack's since their early days of stardom in their respective sports, and we crossed paths many times over the years. He was the guest referee in a lot of my big matches, and we'd always get together over drinks after we'd done our thing and just visit. I saw him in a lot of social situations, and I never saw him embarrass himself, which I admired. In some important ways, Jack sort of took me under his wing. It was Jack, for instance, who taught me about using a 'stick' when I was out in public. I'd noticed when I was around Jack that he always seemed to know everyone in the room, so I asked him how he remembered all those names. 'Well, I don't … I just make it a point, wherever I am, to keep someone close at hand — a stick — who does know all the locals,' he explained. 'If you're walking down the street and you see someone coming who looks familiar and looks like he wants to stop and chat, you just ask the stick who it is. That way you're able to shake their hand and

call them by their name. It's also important that you walk fast, like you're on your way to an important meeting, so you can beg off quickly and cut the conversation short without insulting anyone.'

"In the 1950s, I was contacted by a group that had purchased one of the finer hotels in St. Louis. They had big plans. They had hired a top chef out of New York City and were putting a lot of money into renovating the place — and they wanted me to be their official celebrity 'meeter and greeter.' I was a frustrated maitre d', anyway. I love gourmet food, like to cook, and even know a little bit about fine wine, which is really no great mystery to anyone who can read a label — and I seriously considered their offer. My problem was that I had no idea what to hit them with in terms of salary, so I called Jack and asked his advice. He'd done that job himself, and, of course, he owned and managed a famous restaurant in New York City that bore his name, so I trusted his judgment. Jack was scheduled to referee one

of my upcoming matches in Montreal, so he said we'd get together then and talk about it. So, after the match, Jack and I went to the hospitality room with promoter Eddie Quinn and opened a bottle of fine 25-year-old Canadian rye. What he told me about the meet-and-greet opportunity was this: 'I've been involved in two or three of these things, and they can be okay or not okay. The first thing you need to do is tell them you're going to be coming in there on your own time, that you're not going to punch a time clock or be a 9-to-5'er, and that you're not going to be on call. You'll take care of the special parties and be the personality kid, but you're not going to serve as their maitre d', escorting people to their tables and handing out menus. Then tell them that you'll want fifty thou a year to do the job' — that was a big chunk of money in those days — 'and if they balk at that number, then that'll tell you that you don't need them or the job. You're making good money in wrestling and you're gonna make a lot more. You're already doing fine in this world.' And then Jack hit me with his bottom line, a piece

of advice I never forgot. ‘It’s your name on the marquee,’ he said. ‘Don’t ever let anyone nail you down and use the name that you’ve worked so hard to establish for their own purposes without paying your price. If they don’t want to go your way, don’t make the trip.’

"So I got together with the hotel people when I got back to St. Louis and laid out my demands, exactly the way Jack had suggested. "Well," they said, "for that kind of money, we need someone here every day, which means you’d have to curtail your wrestling a bit," and that was the deal-killer. At that time, if I hustled for bookings, I could make fifty thou every couple of months in the ring, so I said no to the offer. The next time I saw Jack, I told him how things had unfolded, and he laughed. ‘I figured that’s what would happen,’ he said. ‘It wasn’t that they couldn’t afford you, it was you who couldn’t afford them.’

"Jack didn’t know it, but he also was instrumental in keeping me out of the boxing racket

when some fight people approached me during my first swing through California, in 1936, and said they thought I'd do well in their business. I could see that Jack had been punched around a bit too much in his fighting days, and I'd been around enough fighters by then to know I didn't want to make that trip. We're born with little enough gray matter as it is, so why get punched around and destroy it faster than we have to? I hope no one thinks I'm being unkind in my depiction of Jack, because I truly respected the guy and have nothing but warm memories of the man.

"Some of my best times on the road were spent in his company, sitting with him and listening to his stories about his 'hungry' days as a fighter. He literally carved a livelihood out of nothing through grit and determination. His manager, Jack Kearns, was really a carnival guy — one of the reasons Jack understood our business so well — and he did a good job in guiding Jack to the top. Once, when Jack was regaling Eddie Quinn and me with stories about those early days with Kearns in

Nevada, when they were taking on all comers in the mining camps, Eddie asked what Jack would do when he came up against a guy who could really fight. 'Well, I'd just move him around the ring until I got him in the right position, and then I'd him in the balls,' Jack replied. Eddie said, 'But what about the referee?' Jack laughed and said, 'You don't think we'd go into the ring without our own referee, do you? We weren't stupid. Kearns didn't spend all those years around the carnivals without picking up a trick or two.'"

[55] buddy rogers lot more to say about Chewacki than what appeared in the original version of Hooker. Here's what we cut from that manuscript:

"What an incredible character. You never knew what to expect when you ran into him — he was either beautifully dressed and driving a sharp car, or he'd look like a bum, like he'd been sleeping in a ditch for a couple of weeks. He was up and down financially all his life. He could draw the

crowds, though, with that Indian act of his.

"One raunchy incident I remember had to do with part of his gimmick, where occasionally he'd have someone from the wrestling office toss a piece of raw meat in the ring. Chewacki would grab it, chew off a piece and eat it, and generally act like a wild animal. Ray Steele, who loved a good gag almost as much he loved women, had seen him do it several times and decided he'd have some fun. One night, when they were booked on the same card, Chewacki came to the dressing room with his piece of meat and handed it off to the gopher who was supposed to throw it in the ring. When the guy wasn't looking, Ray switched it. He'd gone to a slaughterhouse earlier that day and bought an udder from a cow. So Chewacki goes to the ring, the gopher tosses the meat onto the mat, Chewacki grabs it and starts to put his teeth into it when he realizes what it is. He's standing there with it for a moment or two, trying to figure out what he should do, then inspiration strikes him and he tosses it into the crowd, which got him

considerable heat. Which was the point, of course. Drawing heat was just about all he could do. He was an awful wrestler, but he could get heat exceptionally well.

"He became a master of the old 'hidden-object' gag. He'd use thumbtacks, sandpaper, whatever his creative mind could come up with. One time when I was working with him in Fort Worth, Texas, he came to the ring for the second fall of our match with a metal turnbuckle tucked into the back of his tights. He'd said nothing about it in the dressing room before our match, so I figured he planned to clock me with it. I took him down immediately and took it away from him, before he could use it, and I made him squeal, too. Afterwards, I asked him what he was thinking. 'I was trying to add some heat to our match, Hunky,' was his response. Well, that was crap. I figured he was just mad at me because I'd really turned it on during the first fall, and he was completely out of gas. It didn't matter to him that he could have hurt me legitimately with something

like that turnbuckle. Getting his heat was his only consideration.

"I'm not sure what happened to Chewacki after World War II. The last time I saw him was in the late 1940s or early 1950s, at a restaurant in the Ybor City area of Tampa, Florida, as I was leaving after lunch. This old guy spoke to me as I walked past his table, so I stopped out of politeness. It was Chewacki, having coffee with a group of gypsies. I couldn't stay long, so we only chatted for a couple of minutes. I walked away thinking he wasn't long for this earth, because he looked terrible."

[56] Thesz liked to say he could tell Johnny Valentine stories all day without repeating himself, and for anyone who's interested in searching them out, he shared many of them on the Lou Thesz forum of the Wrestling Classics message board. Here's one I'm fairly sure never appeared there, though, and it's worth including because Thesz believed it came close to capturing the

essence of what Valentine's reputation was like among the general public.

"It happened in Dallas in the mid-1950s, and the funny part is that Johnny wasn't even there," said Lou. "Dallas was always a good town for me, and I got to know a lot of locals over the years. One of them was a guy named Hank who ran the local American Health Studios gym. The Studios was a Houston-based chain of gymnasiums that, at the time, was the largest in the United States, and they cultivated the wrestlers because it was good publicity when the members would see them working out at their clubs. One night, there was a big party at the Dallas gym after the matches — I'd worked with Johnny in the main event — and we ran out of booze. Hank had a kid working for him who lived over a liquor store in the then-notorious Deep Ellum area on the eastern edge of downtown. The kid had a piece of the action at the liquor store, so Hank called him and asked him to open up for us. Three of us — me, Hank, and my date, a preacher's daughter who was a fun kid —

hopped into Hank's car and drove to the store. The guy's there on the sidewalk when we pull up, so he and Hank go into the store to box up some booze, leaving me and the preacher's daughter in the car. We'd been there about a minute or so when a cop car pulls up behind us and an officer shines a light on us. My date and I were in the back seat, so the officer strolls up to the car to check us out. He was a little creep, very aggressive, and he orders us to get out of the car. I had a couple of shots in me by then, and the cop was rubbing me the wrong way with his attitude, so I invited him to come inside and get us. By now, three or four other police cars had arrived, and there were seven or eight officers surrounding the car, all of them looking tense. Finally, a lieutenant arrives at the scene. He strolls up to the car, looks inside, and he recognizes me. 'Look,' he says, very calmly and politely, 'we have no problem with you, but there's a lot of heat on us because there are a lot of bootleggers in this area of town, so we keep a close eye on the streets. Would you please get out of the car and

talk to us?' Well, courtesy and politeness always worked with me, so I got out of the car. The lieutenant was smiling by now, in a friendly way. He winked at me, then he addresses the officers: 'You guys remember a bust a couple of weeks ago, where several of you tried to put a suspect into the squad car and you couldn't get it done? Well, that guy was Johnny Valentine.' The lieutenant then jerked his thumb at me. 'This guy is Lou Thesz, and he just beat Johnny Valentine a couple of hours ago at the Sportatorium. All I can say is, you're lucky I got here in time and saved you from further embarrassment.' The cops cooled off immediately and began to drift back to their cars. Obviously, Johnny Valentine had made an impression on them."

Another aspect of Johnny Valentine's personality was his fondness for practical jokes, some of which were pretty crude. Here's another one from Thesz that, to my knowledge, has never been printed before.

"One night after the matches in Montreal, a bunch of us — me, Johnny, Eddie Quinn, and two sportswriters, Elmer Ferguson and Dink Carroll — were sitting around at a round table in Jimmy Orlando's club, the Aldos. Jimmy, who had managed one of Eddie's clubs after his pro hockey career was over, had gone into business for himself, and the club was a big after-hours success. So we're sitting there, watching the night rats crawl out of the woodwork, when Johnny spots this country bumpkin standing at the bar talking to one of the ladies of the night. Johnny excuses himself, walks up to the bar, and orders a drink. He's standing next to the rube, who's busy chatting up the hooker and not paying any attention to Johnny. Johnny unzips his pants and pees in the guy's coat pocket. He zips up, takes his drink, and moseys back to the table. Pretty soon, Jimmy Orlando wanders by, and Johnny points out the rube at the bar. 'That guy just peed on your floor,' Johnny tells him. Sure enough, there's a puddle at the guy's feet where Johnny's contribution had leaked out of his coat. Orlando was livid, and he

called over the bouncer, who proceeded to throw the guy out of the bar. The poor guy was protesting all the way to the door, saying he hadn't done anything. Johnny was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes. It was a crude joke to play on someone, but that was Johnny. It puzzled a lot of us because Johnny was a guy who had some high-class tastes, and his sense of humor just didn't square with those qualities."

Chapter 18 Endnotes

[56] The landscape has changed quite a bit since Lou wrote those words in the early 1990s. Today, there is really only one dominant pro wrestling company, and that's Vincent Kennedy McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment, formerly the WWWF, and then the WWF, and now the WWE, and it's international in scope. Ted Turner was indeed a viable competitor for a while, but he — or, more accurately, Time Warner, which had

merged with his Turner Broadcasting System in 1996 — sold the wrestling company to McMahon in 2001. Anyone interested in a fuller picture of the wrestling wars of the 1990s is encouraged to seek out two fascinating behind-the-scenes personal accounts of the WWF/WWE–Turner competition, James J. Dillon's "Wrestlers Are Like Seagulls," and Ole Anderson's "Inside Out. " Also highly recommended are two books written by Larry Matysik, Sam Muchnick's longtime assistant in the St. Louis wrestling office: "Wrestling at the Chase" and "Drawing Heat the Hard Way. "

[57] Lou was genuinely hopeful about the UWFI's chances to revolutionize the industry he loved when he wrote those words in 1992, but it wasn't to be. Although UWFI's matches were worked, like mainstream pro wrestling's, he loved the submission style and had happily signed on as the company's figurehead commissioner. He had loaned it the use of his old heavyweight championship belt as its title strap, and had

enlisted legendary wrestlers and friends like Danny Hodge and Billy Robinson to make appearances with the group and add to its credibility. He had begun to lose his enthusiasm, however, by 1993 when the company brought in former footballer Leon White, a non-wrestler who gained fame in Japan and the U.S. as Big Van Vader. It was a sign, to him, that UWFI was moving away from its credible shootfighting style towards the traditional form of pro wrestling by favoring performers over wrestlers, and he soon severed relations with the company. He took back his championship belt and even took the remarkable step of issuing a statement to the Japanese news media announcing his departure from the group. Soon, UWFI's top stars began to drift away from the promotion, and by 1996, it was dead. In a way, though, Thesz had indeed glimpsed the future, as the success of the UWFI approach can been seen today in the rise of mixed martial arts, which appears to have drawn many traditional fans of pro wrestling away from the scripted WWE product Thesz despised. I like to

think he would have been very pleased at the development. Once, during the late ‘80s when we were still involved in writing the original manuscript of Hooker, Thesz mailed me an issue of Smithsonian magazine that included a story that had caught his eye. It was about the ancient Greek combat sport of pankration, which was a brutal, no-rules-apply blend of wrestling and boxing. "This sounds like something I would have enjoyed," he wrote in a brief note accompanying the magazine. And I believe he meant it, too.

[58] Mike Mazurki, who co-founded the club with his friend Art Abrams, served as the organization’s president until his death in 1990. Former boxing champion Archie Moore assumed the leadership role and held it until 1992, when Thesz agreed to accept the post. Thesz, who remained at the helm until 2000, served as the host at several Cauliflower Alley functions that took place around the country as the organization expanded its membership and visibility. Former wrestler Red Bastien, who became president when Thesz

stepped down, was succeeded himself in 2007 by former wrestler Nick Bockwinkel, son of Thesz's old friend and early sponsor Warren Bockwinkel.

Scott Teal used to include occasional nuggets of stories from Lou Thesz in his excellent "Whatever Happened to…?" publication under the heading of "Thesz Sez. " We've appropriated that label for these stories, all of which we were unable to fit into the original manuscript without doing a lot more work than I was willing to do. Some of these stories have appeared elsewhere in one form or another, while others are appearing for the first time, as far as I know.

Addendum: Thesz Sez …

ROY DUNN

(from a 1996 Lou Thesz interview with Scott Teal)

Roy Dunn (1910-2000) of Oklahoma was a

"damn good wrestler as an amateur … not a hooker, but a good wrestler," according to Thesz. He was a member of the 1936 Olympic team as a heavyweight and competed in Berlin. He wrestled professionally for many years, throughout the United States, but he was never aligned with any of the major promotions or organizations. "Some people thought of him as an outlaw, but I always looked at him as an independent," said Lou. "He was a lot like Everette Marshall, in that his farming operations were eventually more important to him than his wrestling. He liked to stay close to home, so when it came to wrestling, he seldom ventured very far outside of the Midwest. I wrestled him a few times in the late 1930s and early '40s, in places like Wichita and Kansas City, and we always had good matches."

"It was one of those matches, a 1940 pairing in Wichita, that came back to haunt Thesz in the early 1950s, when he was the National Wrestling Alliance champion: "Max Baumann, who was the

promoter in Wichita, double-crossed me. Roy and I had worked out a two-match deal, one up and one down, in Wichita. He was supposed to take the first one, then we'd come back about a month later and I'd take the second one. Well, we did the first match, but the second match never occurred. Max simply never scheduled it. It wasn't a big deal at the time, but it became a big deal several years later, in 1952-'53, when the Texas wrestling war was under way. Dallas promoter Ed McLemore, who started the war when he broke away from the Houston office and the NWA, needed help, so he started using some of Jack Pfefer's troupe. Max Baumann saw an opening, so he showed up in Dallas with Roy Dunn, and McLemore started using him, too, as the champion. Max was challenging me in the press and saying all these things — that Roy Dunn was the real world champion because he'd beaten me in 1940 — and the publicity went out across the country. Well, it was true. Roy had beaten me, and I've never denied it, but they hadn't kept their word to me and scheduled the second match, and I couldn't say that

in public. It's a funny thing, after being in professional wrestling all those years, to be hurt by a man I thought was a friend, and that's how I'd thought of Max. Maybe it was a little childlike for me to feel that way, but it did hurt me. We fought back by saying publicly — and privately, too — that Max and Roy could have their match if Roy could first beat Ray Gunkel in a contest, and, of course, they never responded."

Thesz and Dunn crossed paths several years later, in the 1960s during Lou's last run as NWA champion, when Dunn turned up at a show in Amarillo and came back to the dressing room: "We'd settled our differences years earlier — not that we ever really had any problems anyway. It was Max Baumann who had caused me grief, not Roy. Roy was just along for the ride when Max started all that stuff in Dallas and was simply doing whatever Baumann told him to do. I liked and respected Roy, and I never felt any animosity towards him. In fact, that night in Amarillo, I had the ring announcer introduce Roy to the fans, as a

sign of respect, and I believe Roy appreciated the gesture."

RAY ECKERT

Ray Eckert was an authentically tough journeyman who worked with the top wrestlers in the business — Ray Steele, Bobby Managoff, "Wild" Bill Longson, "Whipper" Billy Watson, Orville Brown, Johnny Valentine (he had three pinfall wins over the young Valentine), and even Ed (Strangler) Lewis and Henri Deglane when those two were in the twilight years of their careers. A native of St. Louis, Floyd W. Eckert (it was St. Louis promoter Tom Packs who renamed him) was a top amateur in the region and won the Ozark AAU heavyweight championship shortly before turning pro in 1938. He became a regular workout partner and occasional traveling companion of Lou's early in their careers, and the Thesz record book has them wrestling each other 50 or 60 times over the years in headline matches in top cities like Chicago, St. Louis, and San

Francisco. Ironically, it was his close friend Thesz who ended Eckert's career, in 1954. His wife, Dorothy, related the story in 1997 to Whatever Happened To… newsletter editor Scott Teal: "Louie Thesz threw him over the top rope and he landed in the third row of seats in St. Louis." (The Thesz record book has the match taking place in Nashville on July 6.) "He landed on his back and hip. It was so sore. They rushed him to the hospital, but didn't do anything at the time. That finished his wrestling career. Ray never went back in the ring again. He was more or less in constant pain, but he could still do most everything…except wrestle." Like many wrestlers, including Lou, Eckert eventually had hip replacement surgery. "The doctor who gave him the operation said it was the worst hip he had ever seen," Dorothy Eckert recalled. Eckert was 79 years old when he died in 1996. About his friend, Lou had the following to say: "He was always such a straight guy … a good wrestler and performer, a wonderful guy to be around, an easy guy to break bread with. Just an all-around nice guy."

SUPERMAN

"Another wrestling wannabe that I encountered during that period" (the mid- to late 1950s in Los Angeles) "was George Reeves, the actor who played Superman on the TV series. The show was out of production by then and he couldn't find work as an actor anywhere, because he'd been typecast. I was staying at the Miramar Hotel in Santa Monica when he called me. He knew Marilyn Monroe and, through her, Joe DiMaggio. Like a lot of celebrities during that period, Joe would occasionally attend the wrestling matches, and he got to know people on the periphery of the business. Reeves somehow learned this, so he asked Joe if he could help him connect with someone in the wrestling business and get him some appearances as a celebrity referee. Joe suggested he call me, and that's how we ended up talking. I told Reeve that refereeing was a possibility and that I'd mention it to some people, but as we chatted, it became clear to me that what Reeves was really interested in was

becoming a wrestler. He was one of those people who had the attitude, 'Hey, how hard can it be?' I explained to him that to wrestle credibly was hard to do and not something that you just pick up in a few days. What he was really looking to do, of course, was capitalize on the Superman character, and there was no way that anyone in wrestling would have allowed that to happen. We were already seeing a lot of goofy gimmicks and characters that threatened to expose what we were doing, but Superman? C'mon … and I told him as much. I could tell he'd become discouraged, so I offered to work with him. I told him if he'd come down to the gym where we worked out, I'd show him a few things and see if he could handle himself. He seemed to brighten up when I said that, and he thanked me. He never showed up. Not that week or the next. Which was a shame, because if he'd stuck with the celebrity referee idea, he could have made some dollars."

MISSISSIPPI VALLEY SPORTS CLUB OFFICE

"Our office was at the Claridge Hotel in St. Louis," said Lou. "That's where I always got my mail, and when I came in off the road, I would usually find that someone had opened it, especially the ones that appeared to be in a feminine hand or were perfumed. I have no idea who the voyeur was — Sam, Longson, and Bobby Bruns were the ones in the office at the time — but I suspect it was all three, because it would happen regardless of which one was out of town at the time."

THE ROAD

"It's almost impossible to relate just how far America has come since the 1930s in terms of highway travel," said Lou. "For instance, I remember vividly a time, in the Midwest, at least, when speed limits were non-existent. As a result, I was driving 50 to 60 miles per hour — if I had a car that could do it — trying to get to the next show, and so were the rest of the boys. We were the terrors of the open road. The cops would stop us occasionally for things like reckless driving or

passing illegally, and since we were usually working a circuit that took us through the same towns on a regular basis, we had to remember to slow it down when we went back through some of those places. Otherwise, though, you could pretty much drive unimpeded. Of course, the cars in those days were nowhere near as well-made as cars today, and frequent breakdowns were a fact of life. Some of that could be attributed to the beating they took on those hump-backed, poorly-maintained country roads, and you learned to budget a piece of what little money you were making to keep a car running. Tires were a regular expense, too, because they wore out fast. Once, while passing through one of the Southern cities — it was either Nashville or Chattanooga, I think — I spotted a sign outside a Sears store advertising free replacement on their tires if they didn't last more than six months. I was driving so much that I was replacing my tires every two months, so here was a deal I couldn't resist. I stopped and bought four new tires and went on my merry way. Two months later, I was back, with four worn tires, and

the dealer replaced all of them for free. I tipped off several other wrestlers to the deal, and they started doing business with the guy. This went on for the better part of a year before the dealer pulled me aside during one of my visits. 'Mr. Thesz," he said, "I really appreciate your business, I really do, and a deal is a deal, but you're killing me. It was okay when it was just you, but now I've got all these other wrestlers coming in, and I'm having trouble keeping tires in my inventory, and I haven't made a dime.' I could sympathize with his plight — this was during the Depression, when everyone was struggling — so I agreed to buy my tires elsewhere. I also talked to the other wrestlers and explained that the guy was just a small businessman, like us, trying to make a living, so they did the right thing too. It was a great deal while it lasted, though."

A DUCK DINNER IN SEATTLE

"Jack Routledge, who promoted wrestling in Tacoma for a while, lived on a houseboat in

Seattle when I used to wrestle in the Northwest during the 1950s, and I'd always stay with him when I was out there. The houseboat was moored in a big marina that accommodated something like 200 boats, and I couldn't help noticing there were lots of wild ducks around. I liked to eat duck occasionally, so I asked Jack about them, and he said they were protected — that there was a $500 fine if you took one. Well, that was like a challenge to me, so I thought about it for a while. I'd noticed there was a trap door in the hull of the boat, so I went to a sporting goods store and bought a pair of swim goggles. I'd go out through the trap door, underwater, while Jack was at the front of the boat, feeding the ducks, and I'd grab a couple of them from below. We did this several times. Every trip to Seattle, Jack would greet me by saying, 'I know what we're having for dinner tonight.'"

"GUYS AND DOLLS"

"Sam Muchnick and I had our problems over the

years, but once I sold my interest in the St. Louis promotion to Sam, a lot of the tension went away, and we remained good friends — with the usual ups and downs — until he passed away in 1996," said Lou. "He even steered me into a role in a touring Broadway show, Guys and Dolls, the musical based on a couple of Damon Runyon stories, that came to St. Louis in 1969. Barbara McNair, an absolutely drop-dead gorgeous singer who was very successful at that time, and drummer/actor William Elliott, who was singer Dionne Warwick's husband, were the leads. Mike Mazurki, the former wrestler who'd 'gone Hollywood' in the 1940s and built a solid acting career in films, had played the role of Big Julie, a gangster from East Cicero, Illinois, in an earlier touring production of the show, and he'd stayed with me during its St. Louis run, so I knew the role pretty well. Sam knew the people who were casting for the show and he suggested they contact me. It seemed like something that would be fun to try, and it was only a seven-day run, so I agreed to try it. Soupy Sales, the comic who had a very

successful TV show that was popular with kids, also was in the cast, and he couldn't have been kinder to me.

"We rehearsed every night, running through our lines, and we did a week's worth of promotional TV appearances together, at least an hour every day, both prior to and during the show's run. It was one of the most satisfying experiences of my life outside the ring, and I look back at it with pride. We sold out every performance, we got standing ovations every night, and, thanks to Soupy's help, I never blew a line, which was a real accomplishment.

"We also got uniformly glowing reviews. One local newspaperman, whose name, I swear, was Miles Standish, wrote, 'If Thesz ever wants to get out of wrestling, he's got a career as an actor.' Well, that was too inviting a comment for other writers to ignore, and one of them — a very dear friend named Bob Goddard, who did a popular Walter Winchell-like column in St. Louis — wrote

the following: ‘Well, the review that Thesz got from Miles Standish was right on — but so far as acting is concerned, Thesz has been doing it for so many years that it’s nothing new.’ A lot of the sportswriters piled on, too, but it was all in good fun, and it was great publicity for us.

"The show was a local smash. It did better at the box office than any touring Broadway production had done in the city up to that time. We worked our asses off, and we never saw a dime of extra money for our efforts, but the satisfaction of being a part of a success like that was so sweet. At the end of the show’s run, to my great surprise, the producers approached me and said they wanted me to go on the road with another popular show, The Solid Gold Cadillac, playing the male lead opposite Marie Wilson, a famous Broadway and film actress who more or less created the familiar ‘dumb blonde’ character popularized in film by people like Marilyn Monroe. I was flattered to be asked, but my first question, as usual in those kind of situations, was about money. I’d only made

$800 for the one-week run with Guys and Dolls, and that was fine, because I did it primarily for the fun of it, but a long tour was another matter. They said, 'How about the same salary you made with Guys and Dolls?' I replied that $800 a week was merely sustenance money for me, and it truly was. By the time I paid for my hotel suite and my meals, the $800 was gone. I could make four or five times that amount wrestling, I explained to them, and I really can't sacrifice that kind of money to go on the road working for you folks. Well, they eventually doubled their offer, but that was their ceiling, and I turned them down. Once again, it was a matter of negotiating with people who really didn't have a clue about the kind of money to be made in pro wrestling, at least at my level, and they were surprised when I explained it to them. Anyway, that's the reason I remained a wrestler. As my father used to say, a shoemaker should stick to his last."

LIFE ON THE ROAD WITH ED LEWIS

"One morning, I don't remember where we were, he yelled at me from next door. We always had separate rooms, because I couldn't sleep in the same room with him — he was like an old boar, always snoring and snorting and groaning. Anyway, he hollers at me, 'Hunky, come over here quick! I want to show you something!" So I go into his room and he's standing there completely nude. He'd been on a diet for about three months, trying to get some of the weight off, and he'd actually managed to lose a few pounds. 'Look at this!' he said. 'I can actually look down and see my cock! First time in 10 years!' What made it doubly funny is he probably couldn't actually see that far, his eyesight was so bad. He did have a pair of glasses made that were really two magnifying glasses in a frame, but even with those he could only manage things that were printed in large type. In spite of that, he did pretty well.

"Our deal was that I'd handle the money, and whatever he needed, he got. 'Gimme a hundred,

Hunky,' he'd say, and I'd peel off the bills. One of the cute things he'd do when he was maybe a hundred into me — sometimes it got up to a thousand, if he'd lost a bet on a horse — was grab the dinner check — a $50 tab wasn't unusual — and put the $100 bill I'd given him earlier in the day on top of it. 'Here's the money I owe you,' he'd say. He was getting double duty out of the money. I let it pass a time or two, but finally I said to him one night, 'Hey, you prick! How deep do you want to get your hand into my pocket? Here I'm doing all the work — I've got to check us in and out of the hotel, I make the reservations, I check the box office every night to be sure we're getting a fair count, the whole thing. All you want to do is play cards and walk around the ring like you know what you're doing and collect your percentage.' He laughed and replied in German, 'Just shut your mouth and keep doing what you're doing.' I was laughing, too, because it was just part of our usual back-and-forth. We played a lot of games with each other, just to break the monotony.

"Once, in Minneapolis, Tony Stecher had me working with Bronko Nagurski, and Ed was sitting at ringside as my manager. I was working rough with Bronko that night because he was the local hero — and because Tony always urged me to do it, to see if I could provoke Bronko into giving me a good match — so I'd rough him up and slap him once in a while, just so we were doing something besides waltzing out there. Occasionally, I'd go over to my corner, lean through the ropes, and pretend to have a chat with Ed, as if he were advising me. Then I'd go back out and beat the shit out of Bronko some more. We were getting up an awful lot of heat and the crowd was getting very loud. A couple of women seated at ringside got up and started hitting Ed over the head with their purses before the cops broke it up. I went back to my corner and leaned through the ropes, and Ed got up to dispense some more 'advice.' When he started to sit down again, one of the women who'd been beating on him a minute earlier grabbed his chair away, and Ed hit the floor with a thud. In a way, it was funny, but I was concerned, too,

because Ed wasn't a young man and could have been hurt, so Bronko and I went right to the finish.

"Another occasion that sticks in my mind happened in Texas, when Ed and I were working the circuit. We were riding to the towns with Fred Atkins, who was a damned good athlete from Australia and a good card. Ed was preaching to us the entire trip, saying things like 'Nothing will destroy your nerves like promiscuity,' and it finally got on our nerves. Here was a guy who pretty much fucked his way around the world, and he was advising us to keep our pants zipped? So Fred and I started doing little things to zing him. Like, when we'd stop at a restaurant to grab a bite to eat, Ed would hit the restroom first thing because he had a urinary problem that was bothering him. While he was tending to his business, we'd call the waitress over and tell her, 'That fellow who just went into the restroom? You'd better get his money before you bring him any food. We just gave him a ride, and he looked like a bum to us.' So Ed would come to the table

and order something, and the waitress would insist he pay up first. He'd look at us and mutter something obscene in German, but he obviously got the message, because he stopped with the lectures."

ED LEWIS AND SEX

"Ed pretty much tried it all, including drugs, in both Europe and Asia. He told me once he'd tried both opium and cocaine, just to see what they were like, and he claimed they did nothing for him, so he never messed with them again. Sex was another matter, though. He loved it, and he was willing to try anything. Once, in Paris, he attended a bizarre party that quickly turned into a nude orgy. He told me all the guests were handed these small rapier-like daggers as they arrived, and once the party got rolling and everyone had discarded their clothes, they were nicking each other with these daggers and then licking the blood off each other. That was the evening's entertainment. Thank God there were no videotapes then because Ed said there

were a lot of prominent people there. On another occasion he told me about, he was romancing a woman who lived in the Montmartre area, where a lot of artists, counts, and no-accounts hung out. He finally got this woman into her bed — actually, she was a black widow and had lured him there — and she pulled a basket from under the bed that contained some exotic sex toys. The basket itself was filled with eiderdown — the exceptionally soft down from an Eider duck — which was supposed to caress his genitals while they were fucking. Ed described it as one of the most memorable experiences he'd ever had. 'Americans are pretty unsophisticated when it comes to sex,' he told me. 'One night, I was about to assume the old missionary position with this beautiful German countess I'd been pursuing, but she stopped me and said, "What are you, a farmer?" It was her way of telling me I was a rube.' Well, I asked him, were you a farmer?' He replied, 'Well, I was when I got there, but I wasn't by the time I left."

JACK PFEFER

Lou wrote at length in the original draft of Hooker about promoter Jack Pfefer (1894-1974), but we cut much of it for the same reason we left out a lot of other material — the book was simply too long. Here's some of it:

"Jack was one of the most widely-hated men in the business, but we got along because he always played it straight with me, which really was all I ever asked of anyone. He looked like a freak — a little guy with a huge nose, filthy fingernails that he never trimmed, and long, greasy hair. His clothes were always a mess, too, with pee stains on his crotch and food stains on his shirt and tie. To complete the picture, he was raunchy and vulgar in his language. He was a nasty little animal, and he was completely oblivious — or indifferent — to the effect he had on people. It was hard for people to take him seriously, and that actually worked to his advantage. He had a very agile mind and could size up a situation as quickly as anyone I ever

knew.

"One of the funny stories about Jack occurred when Toots Mondt aced Jack out of the New York office in the 1930s. Toots sent Jack a herring, which was an old ethnic signal that he'd been screwed. My close friend, Sandor Szabo, who was hanging out in the office when Jack opened the package, said Jack looked at the herring and started to dump it in the trash. Then he changed his mind. 'No, I vill eat it, so it is not a total loss.'

"No one was laughing for very long, of course, because Jack was very bitter and decided to kill the thing he'd helped construct by exposing the inner workings of the wrestling business. That's when he started talking to the New York Daily Mirror and running newspaper advertisements warning the public about 'fake' wrestling. Jack especially hated Jim Londos, who was instrumental in getting him out of the New York office, so he put out a lot of unflattering — and true — information about Londos, all across the

country. Londos was a fastidious kind of guy, and I figure his distaste for Jack probably started with him simply being offended by the sight of the man. Maybe he was afraid of Pfefer, too, because Jack figured out early that Jim was probably a switch-hitter, which some of us didn't realize until many years later.

"It's hard for me to blame Pfefer for what he did to our business, despite the fact that he hurt everyone. Some of my willingness to overlook Jack's faults stemmed from his attitude towards Ed Lewis. Jack had literally scoured the world during his New York promoting days in the 1930s, trying to find someone who could beat Ed, but he also had the highest respect for him. In the late 1940s, when most of Ed's money was gone and he was struggling, Jack got him some bookings as a wrestler, just so he'd have some money in his pocket. When Ed died, it was Jack who was there at his bedside, no one else, and I always looked at Jack in a different light because of that."

ANOTHER JACK PFEFER STORY

"I had a girlfriend in Boston, a stripper, and I'd stopped off to see her en route to Montreal, where I was scheduled to work. I got to my hotel at about seven that night and was just killing time until she got off work, reading the local newspaper, when I noticed my name in an advertisement in the sports section. The ad said I would be appearing that night in the main event at some small local club. I saw that and thought, 'Damn, did we screw up?' Sam Muchnick hadn't mentioned anything about any dates in that area, so I was confused. And then it hit me — Jack Pfefer was running shows in that area at the time, and this had to be one of them. What Jack would do is advertise guys with names that were subtly similar to the names of the big stars in the business — like Bronko Zagurski, Bruno Sanmartino, and Lou Kesz. But this ad had my name spelled correctly, so I sat there and thought it over for a while. Finally, I picked up the phone and called the club. I told the guy who answered that I was a big wrestling fan, that I'd

seen the ad in the paper, and was wondering if Lou Thesz was really going to be there. The guy assured me that he/I was. So I identified myself to the guy and asked, 'Who the hell gave you the authority to advertise me?' The guy replied that it was Jack Pfefer, and that if I'd hold the line for a minute, he'd go get him. Well, Jack never came to the phone, so after a while I just hung up. About a year later I ran into Jack and confronted him about what he'd done. I said, 'Those kind of stunts hurt the business, and my name, too.' I asked him what he would have done if I'd showed up that night. 'Vell, Tesh,' he said, 'I vould haff paid you 20 dollars, like I paid zee rest of zee bums.' That was Jack, and all I could do was laugh about it."

DORY FUNK SR.

"It was winter, and I was booked in Hereford, Texas, in the Panhandle, where it can really get cold. One of those blue northers blew in — a real blizzard — and I figure there were no more than 40 or 50 people in the arena that night. I was

supposed to work with a young guy who had been a pretty good amateur, so I suggested to him we just go out there and have a workout, just to show the fans some real wrestling. 'If I hook you, I'll let you go,' I said, 'and you hook me, you'll do the same.' The guy agreed, so that's what we did. It was simply a show for the die-hard fans who cared enough to show up, and they seemed to appreciate what they saw. The locker room emptied out, too, which is what always happened when a contest or a workout was taking place, and they liked what we showed them. The following day, I'm back in Amarillo and I drop by the wrestling office. Dory Funk Sr., who was the behind-the-scenes owner of the territory, said to me, 'What are you trying to do, kill my town?' Obviously, one of the locker-room snitches had already told him about what we'd done in Hereford, and Senior was upset. I just shrugged it off, which was all I could do. Senior was a genuinely tough guy and a good wrestler, and he would have done the same thing if he'd been in my shoes. It never ceased to amaze me how guys like Senior, who had fought the

promoters tooth and claw when they were wrestlers, could switch sides so easily when they became promoters themselves."

FRED KOHLER AND ED LEWIS

"Fred Kohler had been a very good middleweight wrestler before he became a very good promoter in Chicago. He was about the same age as Ed (Lewis) and worked out with him occasionally — and once, Fred claimed, he even managed to get behind Ed on the mat … which is something very few people could do. I said to Fred, 'What happened after you got behind him?' Fred looked kind of sheepish as he answered: 'Oh, he squashed me immediately.' I suggested to Fred he needed to be careful who he told that story to — it sounded like bragging to say he got behind Ed Lewis — unless he was willing to tell the whole story."

ED LEWIS AND JACK SHERRY

Lou loved to tell the following story because he said it captured the essence of what most wrestling promoters were really like:

"Not too long after World War II ended [January 1948], Ed got a call from Al Karasick, the promoter in Honolulu, asking for his help. 'I'm having a problem here with a wrestler who is trying to steal my promotion,' Karasick told him. 'I need someone who can spank this guy's ass in a shoot, and I'd like to get Thesz if he's available.' Ed gave me a call, but I was unable to make the trip since I was in the midst of a continuing program with Bill Longson in St. Louis and elsewhere, plus I was helping book Toronto and Montreal. Ed tried, but couldn't think of an alternative man, so he called Karasick back to give him the bad news. 'By the way,' Ed said while they were talking, 'who is this guy that's causing you a problem?' Karasick said it was Jack Sherry, who was a genuinely tough guy, an outlaw wrestler who'd barnstormed all around the world for years. 'Hell, why didn't you say so in the first

place?' Ed said. 'I've beaten him a number of times. I'll come over and handle this job myself.'

"So Ed went over to Honolulu — out of shape, almost blind, heavy into the booze at the time — and the first thing he does is look up the sports editor of the Honolulu Post, who's been touting Sherry in his newspaper. 'I understand you've got a real good wrestler around here that no one can handle,' Ed says to the guy. 'I've got a couple of miles on me, but none of the good wrestlers are around, so I'll pinch-hit and wrestle your man if it can be worked out.'

"The sports editor said, 'Yeah, I know how you guys do business. Who's going to referee the match, your mother?'

"Ed replied, 'Well, how about you?'

"Suddenly, the sports editor was interested. 'Are you serious?' he asked.

"'Sure,' said Ed. 'But I've got a word of advice

for you: Don't buy yourself a referee's shirt or gear, because you'd be wasting your money. I don't believe your guy will show up.'

"Well, the sports editor just laughed at that. 'Oh, he'll be there all right,' he told Ed. 'I just hope that you show up.'

"Well, pretty soon the publicity was flying and the interest was building. A date for the match was set, and a building was rented. Everyone knew that it was going to be a shoot between two very tough guys, and they wanted to see it. A few days before the match was supposed to take place, Karasick was getting worried, so he tracked down Ed in the bar where he'd been spending all of his time since he'd arrived and said to him, 'Don't you think you ought to be training?'

"Ed replied, 'Training for what? I thought you knew more about the business than that, Al. Sherry's not going to show up.' Karasick continued to nag him, and Ed finally said, 'Look,

Al, I guarantee you, this guy is not going to show up. He's had a lot of time to think about it, and his heart's in his ass right about now. There's no problem.' And then he went back to his drinking.

"Of course, Ed was right about Sherry — the night before the big match, Jack Sherry got on a slow boat to China. He didn't want to get shellacked by Ed Lewis again, so he did the right thing. The sad part of the story is that after Ed did the job, Al Karasick put him on the next boat back to the mainland. He could have shown his gratitude by letting Ed stay a couple of weeks at his expense and putting some money in his hand, but he handed Ed a couple of hundred bucks and said, 'I'll take care of you later.'

"Of course, he never did. Ed saved his business for him, but Al used and abused him. Little by little over the years, you get heat up with these people and you begin to wonder why promoters behave this way. If Al had been destitute, maybe I could understand it, but Al had money, plenty of it,

and he died a very wealthy man. To be sitting on a pile of money while using and abusing people is no way to be remembered."

CARD GAMES AND HUSTLES

"George Tragos used to lecture me about two things: sex — he said I didn't need it, that it would mess up my training — and playing cards. I ignored his admonitions about the former, but I did pay attention to his advice about the latter. Cards were a staple in the life of a pro wrestler in those days because they were a great way to pass the time on the road and in the dressing room. Often, there was money at stake, and those are the games I avoided. I was just naturally leery of playing someone else's game for money, whatever it was, and George was even more leery than I was, especially when it came to cards. Playing for the fun of it was okay, George said, but once you started playing for money, you were begging to be cheated.

"It was George who first told me about the 'singing waiter' hustle that Tom Packs used to run. Packs sponsored a big-money game in his suite at the Maryland Hotel, where he had his office, and George liked to drop by just to watch the sheep get sheered. Packs would order drinks for the players from the hotel bar, and the waiter, another Greek, would bring them up, singing in Greek all the way down the hall and into the room. And he'd sing while serving the drinks. What he was doing, of course, was telling Packs, the only other Greek at the table, what cards the players were holding. Ray Steele was the only regular who figured it out, and he'd fold his cards every time the waiter came near him. Packs would try to bait him into lifting his cards, and Ray would respond, 'When this sonofabitch leaves, then I'll play!'

"There were lots of ways to lose your money playing cards, and I saw a much less subtle one than the Greek waiter hustle one day while George and I were watching a game. It was worth seeing,

too, because it may have been the closest George ever got to showing a smile in my presence. The players that day were Packs, Bill Nelson, who was his booker, Ray Steele, and Fred Rubenstein, who was a wealthy diamond merchant and jeweler in St. Louis. Rubenstein's connection to the wrestling office was the championship belts he made for Packs, including the one I wore after winning in the title in 1937. Nelson was sitting next to Rubenstein, who played very slowly because he could barely read the cards, his eyesight was so bad. Several times during the game, while Rubenstein had his cards pressed to his nose, trying to figure out what he had, Nelson would feign impatience by hitting the table with his fist and shouting, 'Play, dammit!´ When Nelson's fist hit the table, some of the coins on the table in front of Rubenstein would bounce into the air, and Nelson would snatch them in mid-air, and Rubenstein was none the wiser. For some reason, George thought this was hilarious. Every time it happened, he would elbow me hard in the ribs, just to be sure I got the con. My ribs were sore for a

day or so, but it was worth it just to see George's face."

JIM LONDOS

Jim Londos (1897-1975) was pro wrestling's top box-attraction during the early to mid-1930s, and he remained active — and popular — into the 1950s. Interestingly, though, he and Thesz never met in the ring, and many readers of the original version of this book have wondered aloud why that was so: "We did come close to meeting in the ring, just once, during World War II when I was in the Army and stationed in the Tacoma area," said Lou. "The promoter there called me one day and said he had a chance to book me with Jim Londos, who was looking for some dates throughout the Northwest. I said I'd be happy to do it, but I also told him to tell Londos that it would be a contest. Well, Londos changed his mind, so the match never happened. It's too bad, too, because I wonder myself how it would have gone. Londos was a very good wrestler … not a great one like

Ed Lewis and some other people, but he knew how to handle himself. He'd spent some time with a carnival in the Northwest when he was a young wrestler, so he also knew how to hook.

"I was on the undercard of a lot of his matches when I was a kid, just breaking into the business, so I got to know him pretty well. Our problem, if you want to call it that, is that he was the top card in St. Louis for a lot of years, and he was very protective of his status. My dear friend Ray Steele was close to Londos — they'd worked together in the carnivals, and Ray often served as his policeman — and he told Londos about me, that I showed a lot of promise, and that (St. Louis promoter Tom) Packs was grooming me as his hometown star. Well, that apparently didn't sit well with Londos, who wasn't about to give up the local spotlight to some green kid. George Tragos, who didn't like Londos, got wind of it and ordered me to stay away from Londos, who worked out regularly with the rest of us at the Business Men's Gym when he was in town. 'You're no match for

him,' Tragos told me. 'He'll cripple you if he gets the chance.' Sure enough, one day when Tragos wasn't around, Londos approached me and invited me to work out with him. I declined, saying I'd already arranged to play handball with another wrestler, and I walked away. It was very embarrassing for me, but I was more afraid of George Tragos than I was of Londos, so I did what I was told. Not too long after that, Londos tried to steal St. Louis from Tom Packs, but Packs aced him out and stopped using him, so Londos had to move on.

"There's no simple answer to why we never met in the ring; it just never happened. When the opportunity did come up, in Tacoma, I was ready, because I'd never forgotten that day in St. Louis. It was okay for him to challenge and embarrass me when I was a green kid, but I guess it was a different matter when it came to facing a seasoned pro."

William Tragos, George's son, provided an

interesting and slightly different take on Londos in an interview several years ago, saying: "Dad was funny, in that he admired the abilities in Jim Londos that he knew he didn't possess. Jim was a showman and a good businessman. Dad was neither. He really didn't consider Jim a competitor in the sport he loved because, for dad, Jim was not a seriously trained 'technical' wrestler. No jealousy at all. And from Jim, all I saw towards my father was respect."

ANOTHER LEWIS-LONDOS STORY

"Londos settled in Southern California, near Escondido, in the mid '30s and continued to tour as a 'world' champion. One of the promoters who bought the image of Londos as the 'world's greatest wrestler' was Lou Daro, who was the czar of pro wrestling for years in the Los Angeles area. Daro was like a lot of promoters in that he knew how to present wrestling shows and make money, but he was really ignorant about who could really wrestle and who couldn't. Once, Daro got

together with Londos and Ed Lewis to talk business about a possible match. This was after their big payday in Chicago in 1934. They were talking about possible finishes, and every suggestion from Londos involved him having his hand raised at the end. Ed kept rejecting them, and Daro was getting irritated. Finally, Daro said, 'Mr. Lewis, why are you being so arbitrary? You know, it's not that Mr. Londos couldn't beat you if he wanted to.

"Ed looked at Daro and said, 'I beg your pardon? Did this yellow Greek sonofabitch tell you he could beat me?'

"Daro, who really didn't know the truth, replied, 'Well, that's common knowledge, isn't it?'

"Ed was getting hot, and he said, 'No, it is not common knowledge, and if you'd like to learn what the truth really is, you just go ahead and make the match and we'll see who wins.'

"Londos, who'd been squirming while this exchange was going on, decided he'd better try and save face with Daro, so he said, 'Ed, I could put a butterfly in the middle of my back and you'd never see it,' meaning that Ed would never be able to get behind him.

Ed, who was half-blind with trachoma by then, replied, 'Londos, I could pluck that butterfly off your back, put it on the end my cock, and stuff it up your Greek ass before you could squeal!' Then he jumped up and started after Londos, who bolted from the room and was running for the front door, a half-blind man chasing his ass. And that was Lou Daro's introduction to one of the realities of wrestling in that era."

TOM PACKS SELLS HIS BUSINESS TO THESZ

"One of my most outrageously cocky moments came when I sat down with Packs to hand over the money. I had it in cash, in a briefcase. We were in the wrestling office, and Packs started to remove

an alabaster statue of two Greco-Roman wrestlers from the bookcase. I really hadn't given the statue any thought — it had been there for years — but when Packs said the statue was his personal property and not part of our deal, I closed the briefcase and said, 'Then let's just forget it.' I was pretty sure Packs had no other potential buyers, and I was still feeling pretty confident when I walked out of the office. I will admit, he had me 'peeing ice water' for the next three days, which is how long it took before he called and said, 'Okay, come get your statue.' I can understand his attachment to the piece because it's a beautiful work. I've had it for more than 60 years now, and visitors to my home always comment on it. A local sculptor once told me, with reverence, 'This piece represents at least two years of the sculptor's life.' It's incredibly detailed and accurate in what it depicts."

MIXED MATCHES WITH BOXERS

Lou had the distinction of witnessing one of the

few — if not the only — legitimate mixed matches between a boxer and a wrestler. It happened in 1935 in St. Louis when his mentor and friend Ray Steele tangled with Kingfish Levinsky, a nationally known name at the time: "Levinsky wasn't much of a fighter, but he was a dangerous guy with a lot of knockouts. He threw a lot of leather and he didn't always know where his punches were going. I got to know King later in California, where we did roadwork together, and I liked him. So anyway, he and Ray go into this mixed match, and Ray beat him in something like 32 seconds. What happened is that Ray got careless at the beginning and came in on King a little too high for a leg dive. King caught him above an eye and put a pretty good knot on him. It's a wonder King didn't break his hand, he hit Ray so hard. Ray was really rocked, and he stepped back. King came in to uppercut him and finish the match, and when he did, Ray dropped to his knees, got King by the ankles, put a shoulder in his knees, and took him down. That was pretty much it because Ray topped him and took control. Of course, Ray was always looking for a

laugh, so while he had King down, he said in a loud voice, ‘Okay, King, which leg do you want me to break, the left or the right?’ King is screaming, ‘I give up, I give up!’ Ray says, ‘I can’t hear you,’ making him holler some more. Ray wouldn’t really hurt anyone like that, though, so he finally put King’s shoulders to the mat for the pin. And King really didn’t resist, either. The crowd was really upset, because they’d paid their money to see a battle, and what they got was about half a minute of action. Both guys were booed as they headed back to the dressing room."

In 1963, Lou took part in a mixed match himself, and although it was a worked outcome, he borrowed from Steele to end it. His opponent was Jersey Joe Walcott, who held the world heavyweight title in the early ’50s. Walcott retired from the ring in 1953 after he suffered two knockout losses to Rocky Marciano and was earning a living working as a celebrity referee in pro wrestling: "One night in Memphis, a sportswriter came back to the dressing room to

interview me, and we ended up talking about mixed matches between boxers and wrestlers. I told him I'd never done one, and he asked me if I'd be willing to try it. He suggested Jersey Joe Walcott, who'd already done some mixed matches, including a couple with Buddy Rogers. I said it was fine with me, to go ahead and arrange it if they could handle the color line (Memphis was still a segregated city at the time). Well, they fixed that, and the match was set. We advertised it as ten three-minute rounds, and we planned to go for a little while, just to give the fans something for their money. Honestly, I didn't think the guy could hurt me, and he did hit me with a couple of combinations early in the match, but they did little more than shake me up. I was thinking, 'Hell, this is really no problem,' so I got careless. Joe was in his 40s by then and a little out of shape, but he could still punch. In the fourth round, he caught me with another combination that legitimately put me on my knees. I was really woozy, and I figured we'd better end it before he caught me. Accidents do happen, you know. So I'm on my knees and Joe

moves in like he's going for the kill. I hooked his ankle, put my shoulder into his knee and took him down, and then I climbed his frame. Joe was built like a weightlifter and was really strong, so it took me a minute to tie him up and pin him. The thing about the match that really stuck with me came afterwards, though, in the dressing room. Joe looked me up said, 'Thanks for not hurting me out there. I know you could have done it if you'd wanted to.' That was a classy thing to say, and we became very close friends after that. We did a return match, in Jacksonville, Florida, which did okay at the box office, but it wasn't as good as the one in Memphis. Joe later became an athletic commissioner in New Jersey, and he always treated me nice when I was up there."

JOE LOUIS

"Buddy Rogers played a big part in getting Joe Louis into wrestling, when the IRS was on Joe's ass about back taxes, and Buddy sort of took care of him, getting him bookings and showing him how

to work. Joe couldn't do much in the ring, though, so [Montreal promoter] Eddie Quinn asked me to take something like three months and work with Joe, teaching him some things. I declined, telling Eddie it would end up costing me a lot of money, but Eddie said he'd take care of me, so I finally agreed. Joe was a nice guy, but he wasn't interested in learning anything, only in getting enough money to pay off the government. It was the same story with 'Big Daddy' Lipscomb, who was a star defensive lineman for the Baltimore Colts during the late 1950s. [San Francisco promoter] Joe Malcewicz thought he could do big business with Lipscomb, the same way he'd had success with Leo Nomellini, so he paid me to train him. I coached him for about a month before I tossed in the towel. Lipscomb wasn't interested in training and would skip appointments at the gym because he was sleeping in after partying the night before. I finally told Joe that I needed some sleep, too, so that ended that deal. If someone really wants to learn something, nothing can stop them, but these guys didn't want it enough to work at it."

SANDOR SZABO

Sandor Szabo (1906-1966) was a popular main-event wrestler in the United States for many years, from the 1930s through the 1950s, and one of Lou's closest friends in the business for a time. He was the National Wrestling Association's heavyweight champion in 1941 and also had a run with the Montreal version of the heavyweight title. In California, he won several singles and tag-team titles. In the late 1940s, after Lou and his partners purchased the St. Louis promotion from Tom Packs, Szabo — who was called Zab by Lou and many others — worked in the office as an assistant booker while he continued to wrestle. He moved to Los Angeles around 1949 in the same capacity, wrestling and serving as assistant booker to Jules Strongbow:

"Zab was one of those guys who were brought into the U.S. in the late 1920s and early 1930s by Jack Pfefer, who was always looking for ethnic attractions," said Lou. "Pfefer had heard about this

young Hungarian kid who was supposed to be pretty good, so he sent for him. Well, Szabo was a decent Greco-Roman wrestler as an amateur — actually, his best sport was water polo, and he claimed he played on the Hungarian national team — but he wasn't trained in freestyle at all, so he wasn't in tune with the performing style in this country. Of course, Pfefer didn't know any of that when he sent for him. Zab loved to tell the story about arriving in New York and getting off the boat. He didn't look all that impressive — he only weighed about 180 at the time — and his clothes weren't the greatest. He looked like a Hungarian peasant as he walked down the gangplank. Pfefer had a sign hanging around his neck with Zab's name printed on it, so Zab spotted him easily and introduced himself. Pfefer looked him up and down, then said, 'You are the great Hungarian wrestler? You are nothing! You are a piece of shit!' And then Pfefer spat on Zab's shoes. Later, once Pfefer and his partners got a closer look at him in the ring, they changed their minds about him and gave him a big push. Zab was a handsome

guy, with a good body, and the Hungarians in New York — there were lots of them in the city — loved him. He made lots of money for Pfefer's crew. Another thing that worked in Zab's favor was the fact that he knew no one in New York, so he spent a lot of time working out, learning our style, and it paid off for him at the box office, where he was soon wrestling the top guys, like Ed Lewis and Jim Londos. Other towns started asking for him, and he soon became a big attraction around the country."

Lou and Szabo had already crossed paths by the time Szabo won the National Wrestling Association title in 1941 in St. Louis. Szabo was working on top of the cards at the time Lou first went to California in 1936 and they became good friends: "His wife, Lillian, was an American-born Hungarian he'd met in New York, and she might have been the best Hungarian cook I ever met," said Lou. "It was always a pleasure to be a guest in their home because you knew you were going to eat a gourmet meal. Of course, dinner came with a

price: Zab liked to zing me about not being a ‘pure’ Hungarian like himself, and I had to listen to this for years: ‘You are an impaster,’ he’d say in this thickly accented English. Finally, one night, Lillian decided she’d had enough and she came to my rescue when Zab started jabbing me about being half-German. And that’s when I learned that Zab had actually been born in Czechoslovakia. He was really upset with her that she spilled the beans."

In 1953, Lou and Szabo had "a bit of a rift that never fully healed" and it cooled their friendship. It happened in a Santa Monica TV studio where Lou was appearing in a live televised "workout" to promote an upcoming match: "Szabo said he had a couple of workout partners for me who were green kids going through a wrestling school he was running out of Hollywood Legion Stadium," said Lou. "I was always careful when I was wrestling someone I’d never seen before, but especially so when it was for television, where even a bad takedown could ruin what you were

trying to do. Zab assured me they were okay, so I relaxed a bit. The first kid comes out, and he's fine — he's working with me. We do our thing, and then the second kid comes out. He's working, too, at first, but all of a sudden, I could see he was trying to wrestle me. Well, that's fine with me in a private setting, but here we were trying to promote this upcoming match and draw some bucks. The kid did a double-leg dive on me and picked me up, a little too high. I could see I was about to get in trouble, so on the way down, I double-wristlocked him and nailed him to the cross. Afterwards, as I was heading for the dressing room, I passed by Zab, who'd been watching from the back. 'That was a pretty cute little stunt there,' I said to him. 'Oh, I just wanted to see if you were still on your toes,' he replied, smiling. 'Look,' I told him, 'if you want to see if I'm still on my toes, bring these guys around to the gym, or come around yourself. We don't need this kind of crap going out over TV.'"

"Ed Lewis, who was a master at reading people,

had been telling me for some time that Zab really wasn't my friend, that he was a pretty cold person and couldn't be trusted, and he did have a way of saying things that were slightly off-center for a guy who was supposed to be a friend, so I began to wonder. One day over lunch, I asked Fredda, my wife, what she really thought of Zab, and she just sighed. She said she loved Lillian and their two daughters, but she wasn't comfortable at all around Zab. She kept waiting for him to put some moves on her, she said, and she believed it was just a matter of time before it happened. Well, Zab certainly loved women and had a lot of relationships on the side, but hitting on a friend's wife was crossing the line. So — and I'm ashamed to admit this — I decided to test him. A few days after the TV episode, I went to Zab and told him I was in a temporary financial bind, which was a lie. I said I needed $5,000 and asked him if he could help. He put me off, saying he'd have to think about it. I was close to guys like Bobby Managoff and Eddie Quinn, who'd helped me out in actual situations like this in the past, and I'd

been there for them, too, when they needed a quick loan, so I wanted to see if Zab could make the cut. Two or three days go by without any word from him, so I make a point of looking up Zab and asking about the loan. 'Well, I talked it over with Lillian, and she said I shouldn't do it,' he replied. And that pretty much did it as far as our friendship was concerned. Zab could have easily come up with the cash because he'd done very well for himself over the years, so his refusal said a lot to me. What hurt the most, however, was the fact he used Lillian as an excuse.

"It bothered me for a long time, and then one day it occurred to me that I probably was the one who was at fault. You see, Zab and I used to rib each other a lot, and maybe I overdid it. We used to work out together whenever I was Los Angeles, and I'd really rub his nose in the mat, telling him he was too slow to keep up with me, and that all the cigars and wine and Hungarian food had ruined him. We'd be in the center of the mat and I'd slap him on the forehead and tell him I was coming for

him in ten seconds, that he could stand there flat-footed or get up on his toes or run for the door, but that there was no way he wasn't going down. He'd say, 'Fuck you!' and get real alert. I'd just stare into his eyes until I was ready to go, and he was always just a fraction of a second too late to stop me — and a fraction of a second is all it takes. I figure Zab probably got very tired of that stunt and began to resent me. He was a very proud man, a very big name on the West Coast, and here I was repeatedly embarrassing him at something he was pretty good at. I'd apparently made an enemy without knowing it, and I learned later there was some inside heat in the wrestling office I was unaware of, so I backed off, because I could sense some serious heat building between us."

DINING WITH SZABO

Lou always liked the following story, and we tried hard to find a place for it in the original manuscript, but we never found a comfortable fit for it, so it's appearing here for the first time. The

incident occurred in Los Angeles in 1952 as Lou was training and doing promotional work for the title match with Baron Leone at Gilmore Field. His near-constant companion was Sandor Szabo, who was the assistant matchmaker for the local wrestling office: "Zab was very sophisticated about wine and was a careful shopper. When he found something he especially liked, he'd buy it in case lots and tip me off about it. One night when we had nothing to do, we went to dinner at a place called La Rue, which was a very famous restaurant at the time. The maitre'd was Hungarian and a good friend of Zab's, so we got a choice table. When the sommelier came by and handed us the wine list, Zab pushed it away and said, 'We don't want any of this garbage. Bring us some decent wine.' So the sommelier and Zab go into this act, where the guy was bringing us bottle after bottle and Zab kept sending them back. Eventually, Zab decided on one, and the sommelier opens it and presents the cork to Zab, who sniffed it carefully and then ran his thumb over it, checking for moisture. The guy

pours a glass and Zab sniffs it, carefully, first one nostril and then the other. He twirls the glass and holds it up to the light, examining it. Finally, Zab takes a sip. By this time, everyone in the restaurant is watching the show. Zab throws his head back, gargles the wine, and then spits it out. 'This is terrible!' he tells the sommelier. 'Bring us another.' So the sommelier comes back with another bottle and Zab goes through his act again, but I guess he'd decided he'd tortured the poor guy long enough — you could see the sommelier was really embarrassed — so Zab pronounces the new one fit for consumption. A couple of months later, I'm back in L.A. and we decide to have dinner at La Rue again. We present ourselves at the door and the maitre'd does a double-take. And then he slumps. 'Please, Mr. Szabo,' he finally says. 'Not tonight. Come back tomorrow when the other maitre'd is working."

SHOPPING WITH FREDDIE BLASSIE

"Freddie Blassie and I worked a tour together in

Japan in 1962, when he was doing his 'vampire' gimmick, where he'd bite his opponents and draw blood. The Japanese fans had never seen anything like it, and he was a sensation. There were even news stories, apparently true, about some people having heart attacks and dying after seeing Freddie's act on TV. We were in Osaka, near the end of the tour, and Freddie and I decided to go shopping for some gifts and souvenirs for friends and family back home. Everyone knew who we were, and pretty soon we had a crowd of kids, at least 100 of them, following us in the street. We walked into this large china shop that we'd been told about — stuff was stacked everywhere — and the kids crowded into the store behind us. So we selected some things and were paying for them at the counter at the rear of the store when Freddie nudged me. I looked around and saw this ocean of kids, jamming the aisles and gawking at Freddie. He got this diabolical grin on his face and said to me, 'Watch this.' Glaring at the kids, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a nail file and started filing his teeth, which was part of his

gimmick when he was doing TV interviews. The kids were transfixed, frozen in place. Suddenly, Freddie roared and charged them, arms raised like some sort of movie monster. The poor kids panicked and bolted en masse for the front door. They leveled every shelf in the store in their rush to get out, and if there was a piece of china in the place that wasn't broken I couldn't see it. Freddie was in shock, and he said, 'Let's get out of here!' I told him, 'Hey, you're the one who's responsible for this mess, not me. This is what you get for living your gimmick.' The shop owner was beyond irate, of course, and Rikidozan told me later he had to make a big settlement with the guy to keep him from pressing charges against Freddie."

STANISLAUS ZBYSZKO

"Ed Lewis was sharp when it came to reading people, which came in very handy when he was an active wrestler, and later when he got to be one of the top contract bridge players in the country. He

would study people until he figured them out. An example: He didn't trust Stanislaus Zbyszko, who Ed said was one of the few people who was capable of giving him trouble. Ed said he had to watch him like a hawk, because they worked a lot of matches together, but one day it occurred to him that Zbyszko was tipping his hand if he thought he might have Ed in a spot where he could double-cross him. 'His breathing would quicken, and he didn't even realize it,' Ed told me. 'When he did that, it was a signal to me I'd better protect myself.' It was little things like that that Ed did better than his competition, and it helped me down the road, too. The guy was half-blind when we were a team in the 1950s, but he'd still watch guys work out, guys that I was supposed to work with later, and he'd often spot something that no one else could see. He'd tip me off about what I should watch out for, and he was usually right."

TED (KING KONG) COX

"Ted Cox was a good card in California and

Texas during the 1930s and 1940s as a roughhouse brawler — which wasn't far removed from his real personality. That's not to say he wasn't a good guy, because he was; it's just that he liked to get juiced up on wine — he owned a vineyard in northern California — and he could get pretty wild when he'd sipped a little too much grape. We had some good matches in California when I first went there in 1936, but we really hit our stride in the 1940s in Texas, where he worked on top and held the Texas heavyweight title a couple of times. One time, we were working together in Houston, and he got me in a corner and started whacking me, landing some real potatoes. He finally stung me one too many times, so I hit him back, as hard as I could. He looked at me in shock and said, 'What the hell are you doing?' I mean, he was genuinely surprised because he didn't think he was hurting me. I told him I couldn't take getting beat up in what was supposed to be a working match, so he eased up on his punches and started working a little softer. He was a lot like Johnny Valentine, who came along later, in that he had a very heavy

hand and could hurt you without trying too hard. Word got around the dressing rooms that he was not someone to mess with, and that kept some guys from trying to take any liberties with him in the ring. I remember he was booked once with Jim Londos on a show near Ted's home in northern California. Londos said before the match in the dressing room he was going over in straight falls, and Ted protested, saying he had to have at least one fall; they were expecting a lot of Ted's friends and neighbors to attend the show and he didn't want to look bad in front of them. Londos insisted, however, that he was taking two straight, which he could have done easily in a straight-up match because Ted was not a wrestler. 'Well, you can do what you want, I guess,' Ted finally told Londos, 'but before you do, I'm going to put some knots on you and lay you out if I can.' Londos thought it over and decided it wouldn't hurt to give Ted one fall after all, which probably saved him from a beating. One time, when I was still a green kid, I rode with Ted to a booking in some small town north of San Francisco. Ted was sipping his

wine all the way up, and when we started home after the matches, he was still sipping it. There were a lot of white-tail deer in that area, and when Ted spotted one running alongside the road, he decided he'd hit it with his car. 'We're having venison for dinner tomorrow,' he said. Ted hit the deer at about 60 mph and knocked it a good 75 feet down the road. We jumped out of the car and ran to grab it, but somehow, it jumped to its feet just as we got there. Ted actually tackled the deer and held it down until it died of its injuries. It was an amazing thing to see, and I'm convinced to this day that, while Ted was as wild as they come, he would never have done it if he hadn't been drinking that wine."

THE DIRTY DUSEKS

Thesz had nothing but kind words for the legendary Dusek brothers, especially Ernie and Rudy: "Ernie was a great worker with a good body, and he probably did better as a singles wrestler than any of his brothers," said

Lou. "Rudy, though, who was the oldest of the brothers, was the best pure wrestler of the bunch. He was trained by Farmer Burns and won a state amateur championship when he was a kid. It was always a pleasure for me to get in the ring with him because we'd do a little wrestling while we were in there. He was another one of my early boosters, too, which helped me while I was learning the business. One time, in the late 1930s in New York, Rudy was trying to woo me off the road — I was making my own deals at the time — and was dangling some good money in front of me to stay there; he was involved by then as a partner in the New York booking office, and he thought I could be a big draw with the Hungarian fans. I was doing better on the road, so I turned him down, but he wouldn't take no for an answer. A couple of nights later when we were working together at the Broadway Arena in Brooklyn — he was supposed to win — he changed the finish while we were in the ring and put me over. Maybe he thought that little bit of kindness would maybe persuade me to stay. I told him afterwards in the

locker room I really appreciated the boost, but I wouldn't change my mind. His money offer was good, but I could do better freestyling for myself. I wondered a time or two over the years whether I'd made a mistake — New York was never a big town for me, and Rudy would have pushed me hard if I'd stayed — but I never really regretted doing it my way."

THE WRESTLING BEAR ACTS

"Another gimmick I didn't like was the wrestling bears because I believed they took away the credibility of what we were trying to do. You'd see bear acts here and there around the country, but mostly you saw them in the south, where credible wrestling was something that was seldom presented, so I guess it didn't matter. At least the bears could wrestle, after a fashion, which is something you couldn't say about the girl wrestlers and the midgets, so I never complained about them. I remember working one of the low-end southern circuits late in my career, when I was

involved with Nick Gulas, and they were using a bear act almost every night. One of the wrestlers, I think it was Toru Tanaka, was complaining in the dressing room one night: 'I'm sick of this. Every night, I'm either wrestling Thesz or the bear, and either way I'm getting beat up. I'll say this, though — at least the bear doesn't have sharp elbows.'"

LOU'S OUTSIDE INVESTMENTS

"I dabbled in real estate for years because I'd discovered that the rules were different. As a wrestler, earning money with my body, I got paid in ways where I could deduct my expenses. Straight income can kill you, though, because you can't hide anything, so I tried to clean the money I earned by investing it. I bought apartment houses in La Jolla, when I was spending a lot of time in California, and I did well with them, making a couple of hundred grand when I sold them. For a while, I also had a 120-acre resort ranch in Lucerne Valley, in the mountains near Victorville, which I sold for a nice price. I

did pretty much the same thing a few years later when we were living in Phoenix, with the same results. The Casa Siesta Lodge was a rundown resort when I bought it, but I put a lot of effort into it and sold it for a respectable profit. By then, Fredda had an interior-design business that was doing okay — in large part because she represented Thomasville Furniture — so she branched out to Tucson and ended up with a couple of distributorships. I'd gotten involved in a carpet business, so I branched out, too, and was doing pretty well at it, working with a builder in Tucson and carpeting something like fifteen houses a day for a while. Our domestic life was miserable, though, a real nightmare. Fredda was drinking quite a lot at the time and making some stupid deals while she was on the booze, so I decided to return to wrestling full-time just to get away from it. That was a big mistake on my part, because the money kept going down the drain, faster than I could make it, and pretty soon, most of it was gone. It got to a point where I couldn't handle it anymore, so I got all the way out … by getting a

divorce."

TWO PROMOTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES THAT FAILED

Lou was involved in the promotional end of the business several times over the years, in both the U.S. and Japan, with limited success. Especially frustrating for him were two opportunities in California, neither of which got off the ground. The first came in 1954 when Lou and Sam Muchnick, along with Los Angeles matchmaker Jules Strongbow, were offered a chance to purchase a twenty-percent share in the lucrative Southern California promotional office owned by Cal Eaton, Mike Hirsch and Hugh Nichols (Johnny Doyle, who created the office, had sold out to his partners in January). Thesz and Strongbow were definitely interested, but Muchnick insisted they hold out for a 25-percent share, which he said was the original offer from the Eaton-Hirsch-Nichols group, and that apparently killed the deal. Six years later, in 1960, Thesz and Strongbow had

what looked like a golden opportunity to buy into Joe Malcewicz's San Francisco-based office:

"Joe ran one of the great U.S. territories for a lot of years, beginning in the 1930s, but by the late 1950s he'd gotten tired or lazy — probably both — and his business was way off," Thesz recalled. "He didn't even have a TV show by then, which was death for a promotion. Other promoters were talking about moving in and taking over the territory and Joe had heard the talk. One day, he was sharing his problems over the phone with Jules, and Jules asked him if he'd be willing to take on some partners and maybe turn things around. Joe said yes, so Jules talked to me and we came up with an offer. Jules also had a lot of connections at the TV stations around the state, and one of the San Francisco stations told him they'd be happy to have a local wrestling show. So Jules called Joe and made our pitch. About a week later, Jules got a call from Joe's brother Frank, a former wrestler himself who worked in the San Francisco office. 'We don't need any help,' Frank

told him. ‘We’ve done pretty well over the years on our own, and we’ll get this thing fixed.’ Well, within a year, Johnny Doyle and Roy Shire had invaded the territory with some top talent and local TV, and Joe was out of business. Frank was a hard-headed guy, and Joe trusted him, so when Frank opposed us, that killed our chance. Of course, it would have been a tough go if we’d gotten in there because Shire did a helluva job as a promoter and really built that territory into something bigger than what was there before. Still, it would have been worth a shot."

MAX BAER

"Max Baer, the fighter who beat Primo Carnera for the world heavyweight boxing title in 1934, and then lost it almost exactly one year later to the ‘Cinderella Man,’ James J. Braddock, was the referee for one of my matches when I was working some dates in Des Moines for Pinkie George during the late ’30s. Instead of reaching down and sticking a hand under my opponent’s shoulders to

check for a pin, he stuck his foot under the guy's shoulders. 'Hey, get down here,' I said to him. 'No, I can see just fine from here,' he said. So I grabbed his ankle and yanked him off his feet. He scrambled up and said, 'Why'd you do that?' I told him I didn't need him making light of my business by doing a lazy, half-assed job as the referee. He thought about that for a moment and decided I was right. He did a good job the rest of the way, and we became good friends after that night."

"THE BLIMP"

Martin (The Blimp) Levy, who weighed between 500 and 600 pounds, was a popular "freak" attraction in pro wrestling during the late 1930s and '40s. Promoter Jack Pfefer reportedly spotted him when he was a fat-man attraction at a Coney Island sideshow in the mid-1930s and persuaded him to join his troupe. Thesz remembered Levy as "a very nice guy who didn't belong in wrestling any more than a lot of other no-talent guys, like

Hulk Hogan. The poor guy was little more than a circus freak, and I felt sorry for him. Once, in Fort Worth, I was going back and forth between the dressing rooms — there were separate ones for the heels and the faces — when I ran into him. I said hello and asked how he was doing. Martin and his wife — a cute little blond girl — had this gimmick where they'd get married in the ring; they did it in every territory he worked, probably a dozen different places, and he said he was getting tired of it. He said he'd complained to Pfefer, but Jack wouldn't budge. When I ran into Jack later that night, I suggested maybe he was overdoing it with Martin and his wife and the wedding gimmick. 'He vill do vhat I tell him to do!' Jack said. 'He'll get married when I tell him to, and he'll fuck when I tell him to!' That's simply the way Jack was, especially when it came to the freak acts. He realized they couldn't go anywhere else and make a living, so he didn't hesitate to push them around."

A RIB ON LARRY MOQUIN

Larry Moquin was a protégé of superstar Yvon Robert in the Montreal promotion and one of its top performers during the 1950s. He also toured regularly in the United States. Lou always enjoyed his company, because he was such an affable guy: "We used to have a lot of good times together," said Lou. "Once, in the Los Angeles area, Zab was driving us up to Fresno where we were appearing that night, and he decided to have a little fun with Larry. I was dozing in the back seat, but I heard enough to realize what was going on, so I played along with it. Zab was talking nice to Larry all the way, and he'd occasionally put his hand on Larry's knee. We got to our hotel and Zab pulled me aside. He tells me to distract Larry while he runs up to Larry's room — where he got the key I don't know — and puts a $100 bill on the pillow with a note, saying he'd like to see him later. So Zab comes back and we check into our rooms to catch a nap before the matches. Later, when I came down to the lobby, there's Larry, sitting in one of the chairs with a worried look on his face. 'Something wrong?' I ask him. He tells me

about the note and the $100 bill, and then asks me what he should do. 'Well, it sounds like easy money to me, Larry, so do whatever you like. I won't say a word to anybody, I promise.' That really freaked him out, and it took him a while to figure out it was a rib.

LARRY MOQUIN GETS HIS REVENGE

"Later, Moquin got me back, in Davenport, Iowa. We'd gone there by night train from Chicago, arriving at about 6 a.m., and we'd gone straight to our hotel. They had a double available, so we took it, just to save a few bucks. The bellman grabbed our bags and took us up to the room. Once we got inside, Larry patted one of the beds and looked at me with this fond expression. 'I think this will do just fine for us, don't you, Lou?' he said. Well, the bellman got this distasteful look on his face and couldn't get out of the room quickly enough. As soon as he'd gone, I said to Moquin, 'You sonofabitch. I've spent more than twenty years building up this image, and

here you've destroyed it, at least in the Midwest!' Larry just laughed about it, saying, 'Well, at least it gives these guys here something to talk about.' Sure enough, later in the day when we came down to get something to eat, we see three or four bellhops lined up near the front door, nudging each other and smirking as we walked past them. I got red in the face with embarrassment, but Larry thought it was hilarious."

TIM WOODS

"Tim Wooden — his real name — was a very fine amateur at Michigan State University and he got even better as a pro. He earned everything he got in the business. When it came to competitive wrestling, he could break his opponent down bit by bit, and it was a pleasure to watch him on the mat. We lived together for a while in Atlanta when I was getting divorced from Fredda, and I learned just how competitive he was. I was the same way, so we really got along well. We got into table tennis for a while and used to play until

dawn. One of the things I really liked about Tim was he didn't want to wrestle me, out of mutual respect. When two competitive guys like us went at it on the mat, it wasn't unusual for one or both guys to get hurt, and he didn't want that to happen, which is why he always refused to wrestle me. His hospitality and understanding gave me an important assist at a time when I needed it, and I really appreciated it. He was fun to be with, too, because he had a very quick wit. I was telling him once about the old Maxwell House Hotel in Nashville. The manager was a good friend and let me have the Andrew Johnson suite, a really prestigious room, for something like $7 or $8 a day. It wasn't the best hotel in town, but it certainly was the most interesting. My suite had great old hand-carved furniture, a huge poster bed, and even a beautiful custom-made piano. It was a great place for parties. I was describing the suite to Tim and bragged that I had slept in Andrew Johnson's own bed. Tim said, 'Was that when you were roommates in college?' He was always gigging me about my age and my receding hair, and

I’m a pretty vain guy, but he always managed to make me laugh. Tim Woods was a very fine man."

JOHN PESEK

John Pesek (1894-1978) was one of the giants of pro wrestling in the early part of the 20th century, an authentic wrestler and hooker who deserves to be ranked alongside Ed Lewis, Joe Stecher, and Stanislaus Zbyszko. Dubbed the "Nebraska Tiger Man" (he was raised in Ravenna, Nebraska), Pesek did not enjoy mainstream marquee success in his career because he was a maverick who disliked the politics and machinations of the wrestling business as it existed in his era, but the fans nevertheless seemed to know he was the real deal. buddy rogersn encounter with him in the late 1940s when Thesz and Sam Muchnick were at war with each other in St. Louis:

"Pesek was near the end of his wrestling career, working for promoter Al Haft in Ohio, when he came through St. Louis on his way home to

Ravenna. He was trying to set up some matches for himself, just to make some traveling money, and we decided later he probably had some advice from Haft about how to cut the best deal for himself by playing Sam and I off against each other. What Pesek didn't know is that Sam and I had already worked out a verbal agreement to work together, so we compared notes after Pesek had approached each of us. Pesek had gone to Sam first and said he was there because he didn't want to work for me; a couple of hours later, he met with me and said he didn't want to work for 'that Jew,' meaning Sam. That was the tipoff to us that Haft was behind this because Haft was a real Kraut who didn't like Jewish people. Sam and I both said 'Thanks, but no thanks' to Pesek, and the truth is that neither of us wanted him because his style of wrestling was old-school, on-the-mat stuff and the fans no longer bought it.

"Ed Lewis, who knew him well because he'd used Pesek as a policeman for a while in the 1920s, said John was a great, great wrestler who

simply didn't like a straight-up contest. He had no qualms about hurting guys who couldn't give him a problem, said Ed, but his heart would go into his ass when he was faced with real competition. It was a strange thing to see because Pesek could really go, and Ed came to believe Pesek was simply scared of getting beat in public and how it would affect his reputation with the fans. Once he was supposed to have a contest with Jim Londos, who wasn't in Pesek's league, but Ed said Pesek was nervous about it and canceled a couple of days before the match. 'I wanted to see him beat Londos, and he could have done it, too, so I was angry with him when he canceled,' Ed told me. 'I confronted him about it, and Pesek said he'd had to cancel because he'd been injured when he fell off a horse. I told him, "You yellow Bohunk, if you'd waited another day, it would have been Londos who fell off the horse!'"

"Some fans like to believe Pesek was squeezed out of wrestling because he wouldn't go along with the promoters, and there's probably a degree of

truth to that, but Pesek got to a point where he really didn't need to wrestle to make a living. He'd gone to Australia in 1929 to wrestle and, while he was there, he met some people who were involved in greyhound racing. He got interested in the sport and ended up buying a dog named Just Andrew for $5,000, one of the top dogs on the continent. He brought him back to the States and set up a breeding operation at his home in Nebraska, and he did very well at it; his stud fee for Just Andrew alone was $500, which was a lot of money in those days, and he produced a lot of great dogs. He named some of his pups after wrestling promoters, which was an inside joke, because he only used their names on the dogs that couldn't run. I used to follow the dog business quite closely when I was raising Dobermans, and I'd see Pesek's name in the papers a lot. Years later, when I was in Memphis, I got to know some people at the dog track, and they told me Pesek's dogs out of Just Andrew were still among the best of the breed."

MORE ROAD STORIES

"During the 1930s, one of the gags I liked to play on guys who were new to the territory involved this .22 rifle I carried in my car. It had an interchangeable throat that would take either longs or shorts, and I had it zeroed for the longs. We'd be riding down the road, three or four of us in the car, and I'd start bragging about what a great shot I was. The other guys, who were wise to the gag, would start arguing about who was better and backing up their talk with bets, and eventually we'd get the mark involved. Finally, we'd stop alongside the road, set up a target, and go at it. Of course, I'd shoot the longs, and then switch the throat while handing it to the mark, and he'd shoot the shorts, which sometimes wouldn't even reach the target. I paid for a lot of lunches with that little gag. If the mark was a nice guy, or some kid who wasn't making any money, I'd put him over and let him win, just to put a couple of bucks in his pocket.

"Another long-running gag from that period

involved a motorcycle cop in San Francisco who wrestled occasionally. The minute a new wrestler came to town, we'd call up this cop and set up the deal. What we'd do is let the cop know where we were going to be, when we were going to be there, and whose car we'd be driving. We'd let the new guy get behind the wheel, and when the cop spotted us, he'd pull us over. He'd start an argument with the driver, and one of the other wrestlers would side with the cop. 'Yeah, we kept telling him to slow it down, but he wouldn't listen.' Then one of the other wrestlers would insult the cop, who'd pretend to get mad and threaten to confiscate the guy's driver's license and take him to jail. At some point, of course, someone would start laughing and the mark would figure out what was going on. We did this over and over … and I'm not embarrassed to admit that I was one of the first victims.

"Of course, when it comes to talking about ribs and swerves, I have to mention Vic Christy. He was a charming guy, and relentless when it came to

pranks. I met him in San Francisco in 1936 on a car ferry, and my introduction to him says everything about the kind of guy he was. I don't recall who I was riding with, but Vic managed to pop the hood of the guy's car and wire a smoke bomb to the ignition. When the boat docked, we get back in the car, hit the ignition, and there's this loud explosion, followed by thick black plumes of smoke. Once everyone figured out what had happened, the pilot of the boat gave us an earful for delaying everyone because no one was getting off the boat until they figured out what the problem was. What was funny is that the pilot was cursing at the wrong people. He should have been yelling at Vic, who just happened to be on the boat and had spotted us.

"Some of his ribs — like the car bomb, or the rotten eggs he used to slip into Sandor Szabo's jackets and then pop them — were crude, and people would get very angry with him, but nothing stopped him. Some of his gags, though, were inspired. One legendary story about him involved

Lord James Blears, who was a big star in California and Hawaii in the late 1940s and into the 1950s. Vic had invited him down to the beach in Santa Monica one day, and when Blears got there, he found Vic sprawled out on a beach blanket with a big basket of food close at hand. 'Vic tells me to make myself at home, and he offers me some food and something to drink,' said Blears, who loved to tell the story on himself. 'So I'm sitting there, eating a piece of chicken, and Vic pours me a drink from this thermos he's got. Then he offers me some suntan lotion, so I lather myself up and stretch out on the blanket, just enjoying the day. Vic says, "Is this a great day or what?" I'm relaxed, soaking up the sun, but suddenly, someone's yelling at me: "What the hell are you doing?" I open my eyes and look up to see this guy standing over me, and he's absolutely livid. I look around, and I see Vic in the distance, strolling off down the beach away from us like he didn't have a care in the world. And that's when it hit me: Vic had seen this couple on the beach when he arrived, and when they went off for a swim, he simply

moved onto their blanket and pretended all this stuff was his when I showed up. I'd been eating this guy's chicken and drinking his cocktails and using his suntan oil, so no wonder he was screaming at me. I couldn't explain it, so I just apologized as best I could and got out of there. Vic really got me with that one.'

"One day in 1953, when we were doing live televised workouts leading up to a rematch with Baron Leone, Vic got me, too. The live show aired from a station in Santa Monica, and I got there a little late this particular morning, so I didn't have a chance to visit with anyone in advance to discuss what we wanted to do. All I knew is that I was supposed to work with Vic. So, in the dressing room, just before we go out, the matchmaker, Jules Strongbow, approached Vic and told him to be sure I looked especially good. Well, Vic got hot … or, at least, pretended he was angry. 'Fuck Thesz! What's wrong with me looking good for once? If he wants to look good, he can try and do it on his own. If he wants to

actually wrestle, that's fine with me, too. I'm tired of being pushed around by you people, so if Thesz wants a contest, let's do it!' Well, everybody in the dressing room — except Jules, who saw immediately what Vic was doing — figured there were going to be fireworks, and the atmosphere got very tense. Vic and I stoked it a bit, too, when we wouldn't speak to each other. Of course, Vic and I had been friends for a long, long time, and he wasn't really angry. But the other people in the room didn't know it, so when Vic and I headed for the ring, the dressing room emptied behind us. Everybody wanted to see what they assumed was going to be a shoot, and on live TV, too! Well, at the bell, Vic comes in and hooks up with me — he was working already — and I jerked his head down, sending him to his knees. He looked up and said, 'You prick.' Everyone starts drifting back to the dressing room because it's immediately obvious no one is shooting. We went about fifteen minutes, I guess. Vic kept trying to get what we call a hook scissor on me — it's a dangerous hold, one you can beat a guy with, and Vic was very

good at it — but I wouldn't let him get me. As we got close to the time limit, though, I decided, Okay, I'll let him have the hold, just to make him look good. I was only about a foot from the ropes, so I lifted my arm and let him inside. When he got the hold, I just leaned back into the ropes and smiled at him. I didn't know it, but Vic had arranged with the timekeeper to ring the bell as soon as he saw Vic get his hold. When the bell started ringing, Vic let go of my arm and paint-brushed me from behind, hard. My ears are still ringing from that blow. Vic proved that he could still move like a young man, too, because he got under the ropes and onto the floor in one move. I'd never seen him move that fast. He looked back up at me with a big smile and said, 'Goodbye, Mr. Thesz,' then strolled off the dressing room. He later told me I was so mad he could see sparks coming out of my eyes."

ED LEWIS, GOURMET

"Good food was one of Ed's biggest pleasures,

and he believed the best was found in New York. Whenever we were there, we'd usually make a point of eating at Luchow's, a legendary place on 14th Street that Ed learned about in the 1920s from the great actor John Barrymore, one of his Hollywood pals. Actually, there were lots of choices in New York when it came to great German food, but Luchow's was our favorite, hands down. It was one of the great places for steak tartare, which Ed would often order when we visited, and I suspect he did it out of nostalgia for the days when he was on top of the wrestling world and partying there with people like Barrymore, Jack Dempsey, and Babe Ruth. Mostly, though, we stuck with the German food and washed it down with quality beer. Ed loved his beer, and Luchow's had several brands of imported beer on draft, including the Augustiner, the original Pilsner from Czechoslavakia, which is where the Pilsner really originated. Add in the food, which was the authentic German stuff like sauerbrauten, hausenfeffer, weinerschnitzel, and wilted lettuce, and what you had was a dining

experience you'd never forget. The place seated about 500 people, and the atmosphere was old country, what the Germans called gemutlichkeit, which made for a pulse-pounding way to put on the calories. It got to be a pretty expensive place over the years, but nobody seemed to give a damn … and we certainly didn't. It was always worth every penny we spent.

In fact, the only place Ed enjoyed the food more was my mother's when we'd hit St. Louis together. If it was late in the week, like maybe a Friday, Ed would sometimes weekend there; we didn't work many Saturday dates then, and never on Sunday, so the weekend was ours. My mother would really knock herself out for him, sometimes cooking for two or three days in advance. It was something they did for years, in fact, dating back to the 1930s when I had my training camp at their place on the Meramec River. Pop loved the wrestlers — guys like George and Chris Zaharias, Lou Plummer, Abie Coleman, guys that I really liked — and Mom loved to cook, so we'd have

them out for dinner. It was especially nice, though, when Ed was in the house. Mom loved the fact that Ed was such a fan of her cooking — He'd tell her, 'Hey, this is fantastic, best food I ever ate!' — and she'd just glow. One of his favorites was the authentic Jewish sourdough rye bread, which was very hard to find; there was maybe one place in New York where you could get it, and if we knew we were headed to St. Louis from there, we'd usually buy a loaf or two and take it with us. When we got there, Mom would prepare it for him, just the way he liked it, with the rye sliced very thin and then toasted with Liederkranz cheese and slices of red onion. He could eat like a dozen of those sandwiches, usually as an appetizer. Once in a while, as a special treat, I'd get two dozen lambchops just for him — the really good loin chops, which were expensive, even in St. Louis — and cook them up. What he'd do is take one bite out of each one and then grab another. He was leaving half the meat on them, but it was because he couldn't see, so no one minded. I just enjoyed this guy so much. When he'd had a good meal and

had a couple of beers in him and was in the right company, his cup was full. And so was mine. I reminisce a lot about those times and about Ed, and I would give anything to have a day or two of them back."

OLDTIMERS

"The oldtimers like Ed Lewis, Jim Londos, and Ray Steele, who were authentic wrestlers, never spent a lot of time talking about who was really tough and who wasn't. Only the people who couldn't wrestle would dwell on the subject, and if a jabroni or punk started that stuff, you'd know you were talking to a mark. They were the same people who were heavy into the wrestling shop talk, the carnival terminology, because it made them feel like they were a part of the business. A lot of the fans would do it, too, for the same reason. One time in the mid-1930s, in Fargo, North Dakota, I was sitting in the locker room when I overheard this green kid talking to Jim Londos. 'Jim,' the kid said, 'who were the really

tough wrestlers for you and how'd you handle them?' Well, that was a mistake to start with because Londos always insisted that the jabronies and workers address him as 'Mr. Londos.' He looked at the kid coolly for a moment and then said, 'It wouldn't do any good for me to answer that question because you wouldn't have any idea what I was talking about.' Well, that ended that conversation. The good ones simply didn't talk about their abilities or the other guys who could really go because they didn't have to. They knew who they were."

CARNIVAL WRESTLERS

Thesz was fascinated by the world of carnival wrestling — the AT shows — and regretted never giving them a try. "A year of it would have been enough for me, but I wish I'd done it, just to experience it," he said. "Those people were the real wrestling gypsies, and I respected them for it. A lot of them were illiterates, but that didn't mean they were stupid in any way. They were

sharp, street-wise types who lived by their wits. They often wrestled ten, fifteen matches a day, and they never knew when they might run into someone who was really tough, so they really had to be on their toes. That appealed to me — the challenge of living that way, wrestling during the day and sleeping on the mat at night. So why didn't I give it a shot? Well, the simple answer is that I became spoiled fairly early in my career and was making good money, and I couldn't give that up. I never got over my fascination with that colorful world, though, and I loved to hear stories about the carnival life from guys like Ray Steele and John Bonica who actually did it.

"Basically, the way it worked was like this: Someone would stand outside the tent at the bally — the stand or stage where they did their spiel or 'ballyhoo,' and try to attract a crowd by offering an amount of money — say, a dollar a minute — to anyone who could stay with their wrestler for ten or fifteen minutes. The wrestler, called the 'inside guy,' would stand on the bally and taunt passersby,

hoping to hit a 'mark.' If business was slow, an outside guy, another member of the troupe who was posing as a civilian, would challenge the inside guy. The marks would pay their money to go inside the tent and see the two guys go at it. Where the AT shows made their real money was making side bets with the marks. They'd watch to see which way the marks were betting and then signal the wrestlers to go the other way — meaning, the wrestler who was the betting favorite would lose. The scam worked pretty much the same way if one of the wrestlers happened to be a mark from the crowd. Occasionally, if the mark was an especially tough guy or a competent wrestler, the inside guy would have to use a hook to get the job done. Once in a great while, a ringer or a rebel who knew the game — like the great Fred Grubmier — would come along and beat the inside guy, and the carnies would just have to eat their loss. Some of those guys would follow the carnival from town and town, earning a living by beating the carnies' wrestler, but the carnies had ways of dealing with those kinds of problems —

like, they'd invite the guy to dinner, on the pretense of making peace with him, and slip him a mickey. One story I heard involved a guy who followed this carnival for several days. The carnies rigged up a little makeshift dressing room — just a piece of canvas and a stool — for the guy in the corner of the tent, so he'd have a place to get into his wrestling boots. Each night, the so-called dressing room got a little smaller, until one night there was barely enough room for the guy to stand. He had to lean into the side of the tent to put on his shoes, and when he did, someone planted outside the tent whacked him in the head with a two-by-four, knocking him cold. They hauled the guy out from under the tent, poured whiskey all over him, and then turned him over to the local sheriff as a drunken derelict. By the time the ringer got out of the local jail, the carnival had pulled up stakes and moved on. The guy obviously got the message, because the carnies never saw him again. To go into their world and match wits with them was a chore, and few people ever beat them at their game.

"I remember one time when I was a young wrestler and was returning to St. Louis from some bookings down south. I was riding with Ray Eckert, who was a great wrestler, both as an amateur and as a pro. It was early evening when we passed through this small town in Tennessee and we spotted a good-sized carnival there. Lo and behold, there was a big sign advertising an AT show, so we decided to stop and see what was happening. We parked the car and then headed for the bally, where the outside talker was doing his ballyhoo. We listened for a while, then I raised my hand. 'My friend here will wrestle your guy,' I said. The outside talker didn't even acknowledge me, so I repeated myself three or four times and was attracting some attention from the crowd. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a guy slipping out of the back of the tent and circling way around the crowd, heading in our direction. The guy came up and stood right behind us and said in a low voice, 'Are you with it?' It was carnie talk for 'Are you with the program?' or 'Do you understand what's going on here?' I

played stupid and looked at the guy as if I was puzzled. 'With it? No, I'm with him,' I said, gesturing at Ray. The carnie said, 'No, do you work?' I said, 'What kind of question is that? Yeah, I work. I've got a job in St. Louis.' Well, the carnie obviously wasn't buying my act. He looked both of us over real closely and said, 'Which one of you is the shooter?' I said, 'Shooter? Well, I carry a .22 in my car, but neither one of us is much of a shot.' Finally, the guy decided he'd had enough of us. He'd recognized Ray and figured out we were wrestlers. 'Look,' he said, 'we're not going to wrestle you guys. I know your friend here was a state champion in Missouri, and we don't have anyone who can beat him.' So I said, 'Well, how about me then? I'll wrestle your man.' The carnie wasn't buying any of it. 'We're not here to lose any money,' he said. 'If you persist with this, we'll just fold the tent and move on.' Well, Ray and I decided we'd had our fun and should let them off the hook — after all, they were just trying to earn a living — so we left. And that was the closest I ever came to actually being

involved with a carnival."

RAY GUNKEL

"A real shooter is like a pit bull — a very aggressive animal with a lot of courage and little or no concern about their own safety. That fearlessness is really their ace in the hole. You 'shoot' to win, simple as that, and if you need to break a bone and knock out some teeth to get it done, so be it. One of the good ones in the 1950s was Ray Gunkel, who'd been a good heavyweight at Purdue. We met in Indianapolis, where I was co-promoting at the time with Billy Thom, and I was doing some public workouts as part of the publicity for an upcoming match with Bill Longson. Gunkel was one of my training partners, and I was impressed with him from the very beginning. Pretty soon, he was one of the best-known shooters in the business, and we did a lot of business together, especially in Texas. Gunkel eventually ended up as a promoter in Atlanta with a partner named Buddy Fuller, who was strictly a

worker — and not a very good one, at that. One time, Gunkel had to go out of town, and when he got back, he found a sign in front of their arena announcing 'Rodeo!' Gunkel told Fuller to take down the sign, and Fuller refused. 'Take it down now or I'll beat the shit out of you,' Gunkel said. Fuller said, 'Okay, I'll take it down.' Gunkel was a shooter, while Fuller was just a worker, but Fuller was smart enough to understand the difference. If the difference isn't clear, here's another story about Fuller that ought to clear it up. Fuller had some heat up with one of his cousins — their family promoted rasslin' throughout the South for a lot of years — and they decided to settle their differences in a shooting match in Dothan, Alabama. A couple of the wrestlers who were there that night told me the story — that the dressing room emptied out because everyone wanted to see the contest, and that Fuller and his cousin actually tried to wrestle each other at first. Neither of them knew the first thing about shooting, though, so they ended up working the match because it was all they could

do."

THE END

Table of Contents

Foreword by Charlie Thesz 2
Foreword by Kit Bauman 2
Chapter 1 2
Chapter 2 2
Chapter 3 2
Chapter 4 2
Chapter 5 2
Chapter 6 2
Chapter 7 2
Chapter 8 2
Chapter 9 2
Chapter 10 2
Chapter 11 2
Chapter 12 2

Chapter 13 2
Chapter 14 2
Chapter 15 2
Chapter 16 2
Chapter 17 2
Chapter 18 2
Endnotes, Chapter 1 2
Endnotes, Chapter 2 2
Endnotes, Chapter 3 2
Endnotes, Chapter 4 2
Endnotes, Chapter 5 2
Endnotes, Chapter 6 2
Endnotes, Chapter 7 2
Endnotes, Chapter 8 2
Endnotes, Chapter 9 2
Endnotes, Chapter 10 2

Endnotes, Chapter 11 2
Endnotes, Chapter 12 2
Endnotes, Chapter 13 2
Endnotes, Chapter 14 2
Endnotes, Chapter 15 2
Endnotes, Chapter 16 2
Endnotes, Chapter 17 2
Endnotes, Chapter 18 2
Addendum 2